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THE MAGAZINE OF

SEPTEMBER

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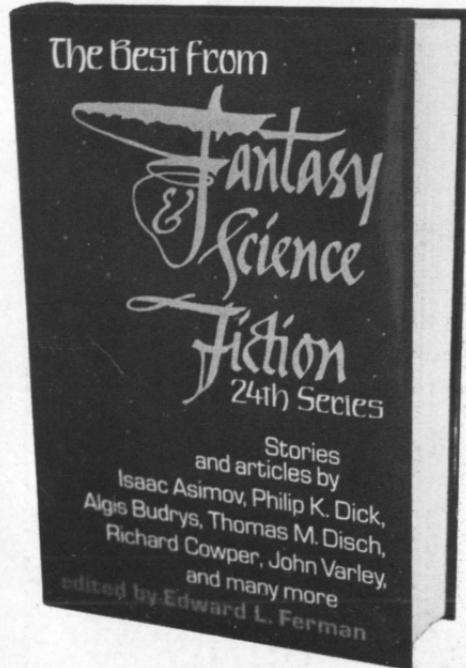
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Here is a suspenseful story about a search for seven missing exobiologists on a swamp-like planet known as Memphis 12, a planet where the trees emit a kind of music that may hold the key to the disappearance.

The Land Where Songtrees Grow

BY

SCOTT SANDERS

Nothing moved except the searchers. In their shuttle they glided through the drowned forest, slipping over mats of waterplants, around hummocks smothered in ferns, beneath the arching roots of songtrees. Vines looped from branch to branch, gnarled ropes of purple, like crude decorations that no one had bothered to take down. Far overhead the canopy of purple leaves formed a continuous lacework roof, admitting daylight in slivers of lavender.

The still waters divided at the prow of the shuttle, gathered again at the stern, and in a moment were still again. The eyes of the searchers ached. Their throats gagged on the steamy air. In only three days of hunting through the watery labyrinths of this vegetable planet they had grown weary, not from labor, for they had scarcely left their seats in the shuttle, but from peer-

ing through the gloom for some movement, some sign of the missing biologists.

Harkins sensed the fatigue in his crew, yet he decided to obey his schedule and keep pushing until songtide. They could rest for the hour or so while the trees bellowed and whistled and caterwauled, let them bathe if they did not mind the scummy waters, then the search could be resumed. He checked his watch. The Earth dial told him it would be ten in the morning back at the station. Here it was nearly dusk, less than half an hour until songtide.

"Movement there!" a voice cried suddenly.

The shuttle lurched as all five watchers crowded to the starboard side, looking eagerly through the transparent wall. Trunks, roots, mirror-slick water — and nowhere so

much as a quiver of motion. For the hundredth time they were disappointed. Woodra, who had done the shouting, tugged a loop of black hair from in front of her eyes, tucked it behind her ear, and apologized.

Wishing the woman would either chop off her dangling hair or tie it into a knot, Harkins glared at her. But he did not reprimand her for the false alarm. They had all been fooled repeatedly, imagining they saw movement in the swamp when it was merely the shuttle's passage stirring a water fungus or vine.

"Another few minutes and we'll take a rest," he announced, returning to his observation post in the bow. "Those who wish to swim must swallow detox now."

Woodra, he noticed, slipped one of the bitter capsules in her mouth, as did Clemons and Sweda. The thought of abandoning himself to these murky waters repulsed him. If these others found it refreshing, well and good, so long as they did not succumb to whatever poisons and fevers this planet harbored. Clemons had assured him the detox would ward off any dangers, and Harkins respected the doctor's judgement.

As far as he could see in every direction the songtrees rose on their scaffolds of roots, each one like a muscular arm propped up on the splayed fingers of a hand. He always had the impression that, if he turned his back for a minute, when he looked a second time

the vegetable tide would have advanced on him, perhaps lashing a tentacle about his leg. Everything was tinted purple, shading from pale violet through lavender and mauve to near-black. Returning to the basecamp that evening would be a relief, if only to see the startling white shell, its geometrical curves swelling up like an assertion of order against this chaos. It had been a simple matter to find the camp. Leaving the warpship in orbit around Memphis-12, the searchers had glided down in the shuttle, following the locator signals that kept beaming out from the camp like the monotonous wail of an abandoned child months after the biologists had vanished.

The camp itself had resembled the bedroom of a spoiled child, with clothing strewn over the inflatable chairs and sleepcushions, tools scattered about like neglected toys, mud and stones and bits of plants littering the floor of the dome. Harkins had immediately ordered the worst of it cleaned up. But much of the debris had to be left where it lay, for it might hold a clue to the scientists' disappearance. For the three days since finding that slovenly camp, the searchers had scouted the nearby swamp, working outward from the dome in concentric circles. During all that time they glided through an oppressive silence that was broken only by their own noises and, for a spell each dawn and dusk, by the clamor of the trees.

Now the trees began the subdued

creaking that preceded songtide. With a feeling a distaste for the raucous serenade that would be unleashed momentarily, Harkins called a halt. Even though they had encountered nothing on Memphis-12 that could budge the shuttle — no wind, no current in the endless bog, no beasts — he instructed Sweda to moor the craft. It paid to follow routines: they kept a man steady in face of the unexpected. That was why he always set one dial of his watch to Earth-time, why he slept and ate and changed his immaculate shimmersuit according to the terrestrial clock, no matter where Project VIVA sent him on his searches. Obeying routine had kept him alive and sane through more than two decades of hunting for VIVA scientists who had run amok or wandered lost or died in any one of a hundred fashions, on any one of a hundred worlds.

"Those who wish may bathe now," he said. "Make certain your helmets and gloves are sealed. I don't want any skin exposed."

Woodra leapt in first, the back of her head visible as a swatch of black through the helmet, her body sheathed in its tawny suit forming a sleek brown arch as she dived. In a moment she surfaced, rising out of the water to her waist, glistening like a seal. The pleasure visible on her face was a puzzle to Harkins, and made him slightly uncomfortable. He turned his back as two others dived into the scummy broth. The only person remaining with

him in the shuttle was McGuire, the pilot, a sagging man of about forty, careful never to exert one calorie of effort more than was required of him, with pouches under his eyes like miniature pillows. And McGuire presently donned his helmet and settled down for a nap.

So Harkins was left by himself to endure the bellowing and screeching of the trees. Whoever had named them songtrees must have possessed an undiscriminating ear for music. For that matter, the burly growths with their vaulted roots below and their canopy of purple leaves above were not, strictly speaking, trees at all, any more than the ragged fans that encrusted every hummock were ferns, any more than the colonies of scum on the water were algae. The scientists had abstruse names for these organisms, you could be sure of that. So far as Harkins could tell, that was mostly what they did on all these Earth-type planets: put labels on things. He never stayed long enough on any world to learn the exotic names. So he just called things by whatever terrestrial plant or beast they most resembled. Of course he knew most of the terran organisms only from pictures and models. In the rescue station, where he lived between missions, the only organisms aside from people were a few dozen species of food plants and fish.

A splashing caught his eye. But it was only Woodra, backstroking from one songtree to another, her breasts

and knees thrusting above the water with each stroke like volcanic islands. His pulse surged, and then it slowed again. A man had to know how to quiet his heart.

The scrawking of the trees grew louder, rising toward a crescendo. He had half a mind to put on his own helmet and close the receiver, to muffle the worst of the din. But someone had to remain alert. He glanced at his watch. Another fifteen minutes or so, and then the breathless silence. Why the devil did they make such an ugly racket? Harkins had read that birds used to sing morning and evening, to woo one another and lay claim to territory. But these knobby giants neither mated nor moved, so far as he could tell. There was a lot of senseless behavior in nature, when you thought about it.

At last the high-pitched squeals gave way to groans and low mutterings, and then to silence. Harkins waved the swimmers back to the shuttle, and he nudged McGuire awake.

The craft swallowed as three water-slick figures climbed aboard, Woodra the last of all. She peeled the helmet away and gave her head a vigorous shake. The hair whipped about in black strands, like lines of force emanating from her pleasure-charged face. "Ah, you should try it, captain," she said impetuously. "The water tingles with their singing."

"You are welcome to such music," Harkins replied. "I prefer a quiet

shower with distilled water."

Woodra turned away as if slapped. Harkins watched her slink to her place. He did not mind the young woman's familiarity so much as her emotional abandon: she would have to learn self-control if she hoped to survive in the rescue service.

"Let's get on with it," he commanded.

Seated at the controls in the stern, McGuire yawned cavernously, poked a bit of sleepgrit from his eye, and obeyed. The shuttle eased forward. They swept another full circle through the marsh, on the lookout for any movement in the mazy stillness, any break in the monotonous shading of purple.

"The bodies would be floating, if they were still wearing their shimmer-suits," Harkins observed.

"If they're dead," said Clemons, always the hopeful one. He was the oldest of the crew, about sixty, with a face round and blank as a clock, and a squat body to match. Being a doctor, he had encountered disaster in a multitude of shapes over the years, yet it constantly surprised him, as if after each calamity his memory were wiped clean.

Harkins said dryly, "They usually are dead, when they've been missing for as long as two months."

The shuttle coasted between a pair of stout roots and beneath a songtree, which vaulted overhead like the roof of a mouth.

"I never could figure out why VIVA wants the dead ones back," McGuire said.

"Neatness," said Harkins. "Every carcass back in its home slot."

"It's the equipment and logs they're really after, and damn the bodies," Sweda declared. She was the team's communicator, a thickset woman with the bulging neck of a wrestler and the cynicism of a space hobo.

Clemmons insisted, "I've known some of these exobiologists to last half a year in the wilderness with only their shimmersuit and toolbelt."

"It's getting too dark to see a thing," a voice called from the rear.

That would be Woodra, complaining like a novice. Why did people with such tender nerves join the rescue service? Harkins wondered. And why did VIVA assign them to his crew? "It's light enough," he said. "We'll finish this circuit and then head back to camp."

Again he checked his watch: supertime on Earth, and on the orbiting station where his quarters ticked and hummed during his absence. You could not tell it was late evening here on Memphis-12, for the gloom scarcely altered from one end of the day to the other. Looking up, Harkins could see the daggers of light between the leaves darkening from lavender to purple. As this external light dwindled, however, the rotted stumps scattered through the swamp intensified their phosphorescent glow. This fire of decay maintain-

ed an atmosphere of perpetual twilight beneath the dense leafy canopy. The swamp might almost be beautiful, Harkins thought, if it were not so chaotic.

"...the sound contour corresponds in the lower registers to synchronous variables ... songtide enunciation period disrupts silence ... tendril growth-rate approximately two centimeters per E-day..."

Harkins was listening to the mission log, earphones clamped over his head. He sat alone in the main dome, a circular white glowtube driving back the darkness, while the rest of his crew curled up in sleep-pouches elsewhere in this haphazard warren of a camp. Sleep always seemed to him like a waste of time, a bite of emptiness out of each day, and he managed with as little of it as possible.

"...mimicry blended with improvisation in the mockingtrees ... fertilization in archegonium is facilitated..."

Why did scientists use such swollen words, and so many of them, to describe the simplest things? He advanced the tape irritably. Before leaving on the mission he had listened to the entire log, in search of some clue to the disappearance of the seven exobiologists. But little of their verbiage had made sense to him back in the station. So he was sampling the log again, here amid the exotic phenomena which the scientists had been studying.

He punched the fast-forward con-

trol, released it, heard a string of numbers, punched the control again, heard a summary of water temperatures. So he skipped his way through their arid record. Toward the end, as the log became more fragmentary, days passing sometimes between entries, he thought he detected a note of boredom, almost of lethargy, as if the ponderous rhythms of the vegetation had invaded their blood. But the substance of the entries remained the same — numbers and scientific jargon — so perhaps it was his own boredom he was hearing. It was hard to care about these pedantic fools. He rarely cared for any of the persons whom he was sent to find. They had wandered off VIVA's electronic map, and his job was to put them back on it, dead or alive.

While the voice droned in his ears, a wraith-like shape blurred the edge of his vision. He flinched round. A tawny figure swayed into his ring of light. Earphones bulged on either side of her narrow face. Her eyes were closed, her lips were moving, and her body was undulating slowly to whatever music played in her ears.

"Woodra!" he cried sharply, to break her trance.

The eyes blinked open — green surprise. Only when her lips pursed and parted in complete silence did he remember to strip away his earphones.

"...in my sleep," he caught her saying.

"Walking in your sleep?" he said.

She removed her own earphones,

and her hair gave a soft black swing to either side. "I must have been," she stammered.

"You looked like you'd taken some cloudpills."

The green confusion in her eyes was quickly displaced by caution. "I'd never touch a chemmie during a mission, sir."

"See you don't, or I'll warp you home immediately and put you out of the service."

Her lips pressed tight.

"What were you listening to?" he asked.

"Some of their tapes."

"Which tapes?"

"Recordings of the songtrees, sir."

"Whatever for?"

The line of her lips softened.
"They're lovely."

"Lovely? They sound like bedlam to me. Like an orchestra of five thousand children in some wretched rehearsal, each one butchering a different tune."

"Oh, but there are melodies, intricate ones. And — well — other things you can almost understand." She combed the fingers of one hand through her hair sleepily, clutching a handful of the black fluff and then letting it tumble down about her shoulders. "If you'd ever go in the water when they're singing, you would hear them."

"I don't enjoy wallowing in swamps and muck."

To his surprise she did not seem in-

timidated by his scorn. Instead she appeared almost to pity him. The downcurl of her mouth forced him to turn away. Through the translucent wall of the dome, the glowing stumps were visible, strewn in the night like pale coals. The vegetation would be seething out there, groping through the muck while the humans sheltered indoors.

"What do you enjoy?" she asked boldly.

Still turned away, he answered, "I like finding things."

"Things?"

"Machinery, tools, people, whatever's lost." He felt unaccountably defensive, as if he had been stripped of all his authority, here in this pocket of silence, surrounded by impenetrable swamp, confronted by a woman who had not shaken off her sleep. He added, "It disturbs my sense of order, to have things lost."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just sit in the station, if all you want is tidiness?"

"But it's fragile, don't you see? If we relax for a minute, things will push in and demolish our world."

"What things?"

"Everything. Space, plants, germs, the hungry universe." He gestured with a sweep of his arms. "That dreary swamp out there with its roots and tendrils ready to strangle us."

"So you come out here to the frontier to push back the powers of chaos?"

Was she mocking him? He glared at her. She was smiling dreamily, a glim-

mer of green showing beneath each drooping eyelid. Throughout their dialogue she had never seemed to come fully awake. Had he been flinching away from a somnambulist? Regaining a measure of his usual authority, he said, "What were you mumbling when you wandered in here?"

"I don't—"

"Before you opened your eyes your lips were moving," He fussed with the earphones, made ready to replace them on his head. "But you wouldn't know, would you? You were asleep. Walking in you sleep like a child. It was probably some nursery rhyme or other nonsense."

"I was listening—"

"I don't really care. What you do in the off-hours is your own business, so long as you don't interfere with the mission." He slipped the earphones in place and toyed with the controls.

Her hand lifted in a gesture of apology, but he refused to acknowledge it. She backed away stealthily, feeling the floor behind her with each foot as if she were approaching the brink of a cliff. The muscles of her stomach and legs flexed beneath the dusky sheen of her shimmersuit.

As soon as she disappeared he yanked the earphones away and sat brooding. It was ridiculous to let himself be rattled by the midnight words of a novice. How old was she anyhow? Twenty-three, twenty-five? Too young to understand how vulnerable the human system truly was. Let her

imagine delicate melodies in the squawking of the songtrees. Let her invent pretty landscapes where he saw the ensnarling tendrils of the nonhuman.

The astronomers who had partitioned Memphis-12 into neat zones had never set foot here. Instruments would tell when the shuttle crossed from one zone into another, but the eye could not. There were no shorelines or mountain ranges, no lakes, no rivers to mark out boundaries, nothing but kilometer after kilometer of swamp. Even at the poles, where the waters were kept from freezing by the planet's internal heat, stunted songtrees thrust like purple fists against the sky.

Harkins charted larger and larger circles, working outward from the basecamp. If the instruments had not assured him that each sweep of the shuttle covered new territory, he would have suspected they were circling round and round over the same path, like a satellite trapped into orbit around the great dome. Morning and evening he called a halt during songtide, for he trusted neither himself nor his crew to keep an alert eye on the swamp during that nerve-grating concert. McGuire invariably took advantage of these respites to catch up on his sleep, as if he were compensating in this lifetime for a previous lifetime of wakefulness. Sweda and Clemons sometimes played chess, sometimes perched drowsily on the upthrust

knees of the songtree roots, sometimes floated lazily in the water, hands touching: a mission romance there, Harkins realized. It did not matter, so long as they kept to their work. Only the captain must remain free of the entanglements of flesh.

During these songtide rests, Woodra always swam. As if against his will, Harkins kept watching her. He would be seated in his place at the bow of the shuttle, calculating new search patterns or planning how to salvage the scientists' camp, when the sleek brown shape would hook his attention and drag his gaze back and forth through the water.

Catching him at this one time, McGuire drowsily commented, "She's a tender one, she is."

"I was just wondering if there's something in that muck the detox won't handle," Harkins explained quickly. "I can't afford anyone getting sick."

"Indeed, captain, indeed," McGuire replied with a skeptical smacking of his lips.

On the sixth day the scanners guided them to a concentration of metal, which proved to be the seven toolbelts, concealed in a hollow stump. Some of the tools were missing, but each belt still carried the small transmitter which should have been constantly beaming out location signals.

Holding one of these locators up for everyone to see, Harkins said, "They've all been jammed."

Several hands reached self-consciously to the transmitters which hung at the searchers' own waists. The devices were immune to almost any accident. They were like a badge that guaranteed readmission to the human zone, no matter how far one traveled.

"That took some doing," said Clemons. His flat round face was like a plate, painted to illustrate astonishment.

Woodra leaned over the snarl of belts, which had been heaped in the aisle of the shuttle. She made Harkins think of a child who had just discovered the wreckage of a favorite toy. "Who would have done that?" she said.

"Somebody or something that didn't want them to be found," Harkins replied. gingerly he pushed his boot into the mass of tools and survival capsules and tangled instruments. "You still expect to find them alive, Clemons?"

"Well, sir, there've been cases—"

"Never mind, never mind. I don't want to hear any tales of miraculous endurance. Let's just find them and get off this beastly planet. They can't have gotten far, without equipment."

Piece by piece they turned up the remaining tools in the next few hours. Together with the domes, the shuttle, and various monitoring devices, this accounted for the entire inventory the scientists had brought with them. Only the seven bodies were still missing. When Harkins went on a salvage mis-

sion, he always found the equipment easily: scanners could pick them out against any natural background. But the human body was damnable hard to locate, unless the body in question cooperated; it had a tendency to dissolve into the landscape. An empath could locate bodies, if the competing life-fields were not too strong. He had even brought an empath along to Memphis-12, but after one day in the swamp the man had been driven frantic by the waves of force radiating from the songtrees. Never quite trusting empaths, who seemed to wear their nerves on the outside of their skin, Harkins had immediately shipped him back up to the orbiting warpship. Eyes would have to do.

Her eyes were open this time when she stole noiselessly into his pool of light in the main dome. The earphones dangled like a necklace about her throat. For a minute after sensing her presence Harkins did not look up from the map he was studying. At length, he said, "What is it, Woodra?"

"I couldn't sleep, sir, for thinking about the songtrees."

He sighed. She hovered at the edge of the light, the fabric of her shimmer-suit glistening, like a specter hesitating on the threshold of materiality. "Isn't listening to them morning and evening unpleasant enough? How can you bear listening to tapes of them half the night?"

"I think I'm beginning to hear words in their singing."

"Words? What sort of words? You're not pretending those brutes possess a language, are you?"

"I wouldn't know about that, sir. What I'm hearing is human speech. Words in French and English and Chinese. Maybe some Russian, too, but my Russian's a little shaky and I can't be sure."

He studied her. She was awake this time, the green eyes open wide. Perhaps she really was taking cloud-pills, or some other chemmie. Yet her voice sounded clear. He needed a better look at her. "Don't hang back there in the darkness. Come, sit down, and tell me about these — messages."

She edged closer. The glowtube overhead suspended shadows beneath her nose, lips, chin, breasts. She was excited, but did not appear drugged. Without sitting down, she said, "They aren't messages, really. They're just words."

"Such as?"

From the belt at her waist she produced a notepad. "'Photon, physics, phlegmatic,'" she read, "'popcorn, participle, pumpernickel, pickle—'"

He interrupted sarcastically: "You discovered this in their screeching?"

"There's a good deal more, sir," she replied, riffling the pages of her notepad with a thumb.

"And do they all begin with 'P'?"

"Oh, no, captain. That's just where I happened to start reading. The mock-

ingtrees seem to be fond of rhyming, and their words run in patches like that, with a thread of sound stitching them together. 'Rarity, ribcage, rhomboid, Rumpelstiltskin...'"

"Yes, yes, I see."

"Silly Sally stole silent Sam's suspenders..."

"I get the idea," he said.

She suddenly plopped down on the bench next to him and pressed her palms between her knees. "I first noticed it when I was swimming during songtide, you see. No, I thought, I'm just putting human words to alien music. But every day the impression grew stronger. I'd keep my head underwater as long as I could, listening, and by the fourth day or so I was *sure* I recognized some words in what the mockingtrees were singing."

With exaggerated patience, as he would humor the fancies of a child, he inquired, "How does one distinguish mockingtrees from the other varieties?"

"They're the ones with the shiny knees," she rushed on, rubbing her own knees for illustration. "Haven't you ever noticed their roots? Anyway, last night I discovered a whole section of recordings devoted to mockingtree arias—"

"Arias?"

"Strings of words in three or four languages, rhyming every way you can imagine. The recordings aren't half so rich as the things I'm hearing out there in the swamp."

"How is it nobody else on the crew has detected these — patterns?"

"Perhaps no one else has cared to listen, sir. The words aren't what you would call crystal-clear."

"No, I don't imagine they are."

"Would you care to listen?" she said, unclasping the earphones from around her neck. "I've brought a sample."

In exasperation he said, "Woodra, if you expect to last very long in the service, jumping from one godforsaken planet to another, you'll have to learn to leave your imagination at home. The creatures you dream up are far more dangerous than anything you're ever likely to encounter in the flesh."

"Won't you just listen?" She dangled the headset before his face.

Reluctantly he took it, hoping to put an end to her raving. The pads against his ears were still warm from pressing her throat, and for a moment that sensation drowned out all others. Then he registered the sounds, the too familiar pandemonium of songtide. Were there words in that racket? He tried to hear something intelligible in the noise, but could not. She was watching him expectantly, her face uncomfortably close, the pores like grains of sand broadcast over her cheeks. Her mouth was slightly parted. He imagined her breath eddying in and out, delicate lifewaves licking against the shore of her lips. He found himself inclining toward her, unconscious of the songtide blaring in his ears.

Then suddenly recovering himself he ripped away the earphones and recoiled from her. "It's nothing but noise."

She stood up with a show of painful confusion. "You didn't hear—?"

"I heard bleats and warbles and screeches. Gibberish. Pure noise. You've imagined the whole business."

"It takes some patience—"

"I've run out of patience. I have seven corpses to find and the five of us to deliver home safely, and I don't have enough energy left over to play games of make-believe with you in the middle of the night."

Obstinately shaking her head, she edged away from him until nothing remained in the light except her feet — bare, he noticed for the first time, as if she had risen from her bed to fetch a drink of water. Then the feet too withdrew, and she was a shadow retreating down the passageway.

"Woodra," he called after her, "if you promise not to repeat this nonsense to the rest of the crew, I will omit it from your service file."

She hesitated, a slender silhouette framed in the round throat of the passage. "I won't breathe a word of it to anyone," she said coldly.

A wave of despair swept over him. Before she could escape, he added, "I'll even permit you to crew with me on future missions, if you'll just get this childishness out of your system."

Her reply was barely audible: "There are other crews, sir."

Some of the protruding roots did appear shinier than the others, like knees with oil massaged into them. Were these the mocking trees? Harkins wondered. Perhaps Woodra was right about that much. Involuntarily, he recollect ed how she had rubbed her knee.

He was dwelling upon that when McGuire shouted, "Do we stop, Captain?"

Harkins craned round and blinked at him. "Stop?"

"The trees have been singing for several minutes now, sir."

The noise crashed in on him. He blinked again. The other four searchers were staring curiously at him. "Songtide ... of course. I was just waiting until we reached a clear spot for mooring. This will do."

Before he had finished speaking, Woodra splashed into the water. Clemons and Sweda followed her in, which was not so unusual. But when McGuire forsook his regular nap in order to join them, Harkins began to feel uneasy. The four of them cruised lazily through the swamp, floating on their backs, legs scissoring languidly, eyes shut within their bubble helmets. As they drifted near the shuttle, their lips were moving and their faces wore an expression of serenity which Harkins found alarming. Had they all caught some form of sleeping sickness?

The clamor of the songtrees kept him from thinking clearly. Momentarily paying attention to the noise, he fan-

cied he heard a gutteral rendering of 'broom, brush, brand,' then a rhyming litany of words that might have been Chinese. He slapped his legs irritably, to drown the idiot noises. That's all they were, idiot noises. If you wanted to badly enough, you could hear anything in them. It was like seeing shapes in clouds, grouping stars into the semblances of beasts. But there was nothing there, nothing but brute chaos. *'Femme, fenetre, fer...'.*

"Nothing!" He slammed the hull with his fist.

Woodra peered drowsily at him as she floated by. Beneath the helmet her lips never stopped murmuring.

Regaining his composure, Harkins sat rigid in the captain's seat. He endured the rest of the songtide as he would endure any pain. Noise and pain, they were merely nature's static, flung out to fill up the emptiness.

Once they were back aboard, the four swimmers kept whispering. Perched in the bow with his back to them, he felt their words scrabbling up and down his spine like the footsteps of insects. Before the shuttle had proceeded very far he spun round, and with his rage barely under control he demanded, "What are you mumbling?"

Clemons turned on him that moonface, blank with an impassivity which even the bloodiest mess on an operating table could not disturb. "Why, nothing, sir."

"I saw you in the water with your mouths going, like a pack of fish grop-

ing for air. And I've heard you muttering behind me. Now what the devil is it?"

"Oh," said Clemons, glancing at the others, "I was just singing a bunch of old jingles I used to hear on the video."

"Opera," said McGuire.

"Limericks," Sweda confessed.

Woodra turned away and said nothing.

The shuttle drifted to a dead stop in the calm water, in the calm air, in the unbroken stillness of the drowned forest.

"You're all sick," Harkins said carefully. "You've come down with some bug from swimming in that filth."

The doctor's face cracked into a sappy grin, like a plate with a flaw in it. "Sick, sir? I'd say we're healthy. At least four of us."

"You appear to be the only one who can't hear the singing. It's a delight, the pleasantest music I've ever heard."

Harkins restrained himself. If he lost control now, they might all become bait for yet another rescue team. "Clemons, even you must realize by now that those biologists are dead. Something got to them. The camp's a mess. Their food stores were left open, as if they'd given up eating. They abandoned their shuttle, their tools, even their survival kits and locators. The log dwindles away into incoherent fragments, and finally to silence." He fixed each of them in turn with a sober

stare, except Woodra, who glanced furtively away. "I think they went mad, and I think maybe you've all come down with the same thing."

Nothing moved. The five sat utterly still. Nearby stumps appeared to glow brightly, the only sign that night had descended upon the swamp.

At last Woodra pronounced soothingly, "Maybe you're right, sir. Maybe it's a sickness, hearing that seductive poetry."

"I'll give everyone a thorough exam," said Clemons.

McGuire added, "No more swimming, I guess."

"Correct," said Harkins. He lifted his shoulders, to relieve the tension in his back, then let them fall. "No one goes in the water. And during songtide we cover our ears."

The others shrugged agreement, but with a show of reluctance.

Later, as they were finishing their last sweep in the lavender twilight, Woodra sidled up quietly and stood beside him. He pretended not to notice her, but her nearness quickened his breathing.

"Yes?" he said irritably.

"Sir, about the chants and things we've been hearing—"

"You think you've been hearing."

"—well, the further we circle out from camp, the stronger they get. And the words seem clearest in one particular sector."

A strand of hair curled just below her lip, like a soft hook. He had to

make an effort to keep from brushing it away. "So now you are applying science to your fantasies?"

"If we could somehow follow the gradient of volume and clarity, establish a vector," she explained patiently, "maybe we could trace the words back to wherever the mockingtrees are learning them."

He looked at her with awe: the delusion had fixed itself so deeply in her that it had a kind of purity, like religious conviction. Hopefully it would pass as fevers passed, as the manias of childhood passed. He said, "Go back to your seat, Woodra, and watch for yellow shimmersuits in that purple gloom. That's how we'll find our corpses."

Before songtide next morning, as the shuttle glided past a fern-covered hummock, Woodra cried, "Look there's a yellow bundle."

Unsnarled, the bundle proved to consist of seven yellow shimmersuits knotted together sleeve-to-sleeve, like the castoff skins of creatures that had molted while dancing hand-in-hand.

"They're naked somewhere in that mire," Harkins said with disgust.

"They won't be floating now," McGuire observed.

For once, Clemons found nothing hopeful to say.

Harkins glowered at the swamp: water flat as a mirror, gnarled trunks squatting motionless on spider-leg

roots, rags of vegetation as stiff as if carved from glass. The bodies could be anywhere, but they were probably tangled down in the murky depth. The prospect of returning without even corpses — something he had been forced to do only five or six times in over two hundred missions — oppressed him. VIVA scientists did not seem to worry overmuch about dying; but they wanted someone to know where and how they had died, as if their death were the clinching piece of data in an experiment. He could understand that passionate desire to return, if only as a corpse, to be put back in place like a pawn at the end of a game of chess.

"I think I might be able to find them, sir."

He sensed her hovering like a flame near his shoulder. "Woodra, I don't want to lose any more—"

"This is the sector where the words have been clearest," she said in a rush, "and if you'd let me go into the water during songtide, maybe I could track them to their source. Everyone else could stay on board with their ears plugged, and you could follow me in the shuttle. Then if I'm wrong about all this and it really is some kind of sickness, you'll only have one lunatic to fish out of the swamp."

The trees were uttering their preliminary croaks. Harkins dreaded the racket that would follow. He gazed along the aisle, to make sure the others had their helmets in place and their receivers shut down as he had ordered.

His own ears he would leave uncovered, for he was immune. He could not tell which possibility bothered him more: there being no pattern in the songtides, or there being a pattern which he alone was incapable of hearing. Finally he said, 'You've taken the detox?'

'Yessir.'

'I'll have to go back and explain to McGuire.'

'I've already done that, sir.'

She was so eager to be in the water that her whole body trembled. He had a yearning to press his hands over her ears and preserve her from this intoxication. But there were seven missing pieces from VIVA's galactic puzzle, and he must take any reasonable chance to recover them. "All right, you can try it. But at the first sign of trouble we'll drag you out."

In a single excited motion she pulled on her helmet and shoved open the forward hatch. As she tilted over the water, he nearly reached out and wrapped his arms about her. Before he could lift a hand, she dived into the swamp. Emerging from a froth of bubbles, she floated on her back, with half the helmet above the surface and half below. Eyes closed and lips slowly mouthing words, she drifted around like a compass needle. Then apparently orienting herself, she began scudding across water.

McGuire eased the shuttle along in her wake. From where he sat in the bow, Harkins could almost lean out

and touch her churning feet. Occasionally she stopped kicking, held very still as if listening and swung her head sluggishly from side to side, before setting off again. The songtree chorus was deafening, the sound of chaos seething over him. And yet words seemed to rise above the turmoil like rainbows glimmering above a waterfall. 'Fire, free, forest, forever...' There was a delicious taste of song on his tongue. 'Lilacs lilting lassitude...'

Raking against a submerged root, the shuttle gave a sudden lurch. Harkins flinched awake. With horror he realized that his eyes had fallen shut and his lips had been trembling. He sat erect and with a conscious effort blocked out the seductive waterfall of words.

Woodra still swam just beyond his reach, water slithering over her thighs and belly. There was a look of voluptuous pleasure on her face, a look which he could not begin to understand, and she appeared to be crying out.

"Catch up to her, McGuire!" he yelled "We've got to pull her out."

But of course McGuire would not be able to hear him. No one could hear him. The three faces in their sealed helmets gazed stupidly at him like bottled specimens. He gestured madly, and McGuire, not understanding what he wanted, drew the shuttle to a halt.

"Catch her!" Harkins stabbed his finger in the direction of Woodra's enchanted body, which was gliding away

through the tangle of roots and vines.

McGuire lifted his eyebrows in bafflement.

Without giving himself time to think, Harkins shoved the helmet down over his head, sealed it to the neck-ring on his suit, and leapt out through the forward hatch. He kept his head up as he smacked the water. The rhythmic chantings of the songtrees poured through his submerged limbs like an electric current. He nearly gagged at the shock, at the scum, at the snarl of vegetation. But thinking of the ecstatic abandon on Woodra's face, he fought down the panic. He swam after her, head as high as he could carry it.

He gained on her quickly, for she seemed to have stopped kicking. Grabbing hold of a songtree root, she pulled herself upright in the water. She sees me, he thought. She's snapping out of it.

But as he drew near she tugged her helmet away and flung it aside.

"No, Woodra, no!" he screamed, and his voice reverberated inside his helmet.

She unzipped the shimmersuit from neck to belly and was just wriggling free of it when he reached her. He grabbed her about the ribs with one arm and with the other clung to the vaulting root, struggling to keep her head above water. She writhed against him feebly, like a sleeper caught in the web of dream. With balled fists she hammered weakly on his helmet.

"Songtrees bongtrees along please

wrong knees," she babbled.

The songtide kept pouring through him like a tingle of pleasure along his bones. Woodra kept writhing, trying to slip from his grasp down under the water. He longed to let go and sink alongside her into the purple depths. Yet he clung blindly to the root, to the air, to consciousness, and would not let her go.

Presently the shuttle eased alongside, arms reached down and laid hold of her, and he let them drag her up to safety.

Almost reluctantly he crawled in through the hatch after her. As his toes cleared the water, the pleasurable tingle ceased. Woodra lay in the aisle, arms and legs flailing with an underwater slowness. Sweda was tugging at the shimmersuit to cover a bare shoulder. A seam of pink skin showed where the suit parted over her belly, and Harkins thought of a baby's translucent eyelid.

Clemmons bent down and poured a few drops of something into Woodra's mouth. In a moment her flailing gave way to twitches, like the afterquakes from sobbing. Her eyes slicked open.

Above the continuing racket of the songtrees, Harkins barely made out what she said: "It was so beautiful. That's why they're here, for the singing."

"Who's here?" he asked gently, stooping over her.

"The singers."

When Harkins looked up, he saw

that Clemons, Sweda and McGuire were crowded together at the hatch, staring out. They had all removed their helmets. Feeling a chill of premonition, he rose and joined them. Above their shoulders he could make out the sprawling roots where he had caught up with Woodra, and beyond that, in a placid expanse of water, he saw the floating bodies. He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, the bodies still floated there, seven of them, naked, lying just below the surface, with only the faces exposed to the air. Hair wavered out in a halo about each head. At first he thought the underwater tendrils merely coiled around them. But then, thrusting his way among the other watchers for a closer look, he saw that the roots and vines had grown through the bodies, penetrating the skin in a hundred places. And he saw, an instant before he heard, that all seven faces were shouting with a kind of exultation.

The voices were strong, like those of opera singers at fiercest pitch, and they chanted in at least four languages, chests swelling mightily. What they chanted sounded like nursery rhymes, like the jingling nonsense that children make up for games of skipping, but with the rich lexicon of adults. Nearby mockingtrees took up the sounds and toyed with them, improvised, spun dizzy variations. The air was saturated with the sumptuous jazz of human speech. More distant mockingtrees repeated the chants in slightly garbled

form, so that the ecstatic songs of these seven dreamers pulsed out through the swamp like rings of rumors passing through a crowd.

The searchers stared down entranced at the heaving bodies. Harkins was horrified, yet the exultant music aroused an elemental joy in him, the joy of first speech, dropping onto his tongue like fruits he had not tasted since childhood.

The singers' breathing slackened imperceptibly; their voices dwindled; and, as if at the signal of a conductor's baton, all seven mouths snapped shut. For a minute or so the neighboring trees sustained their music; then they too subsided, and trees more remote wailed briefly, and the silence swept outward like a shockwave until the entire lavender world was plunged again into stillness.

No one moved in the stunned group of searchers.

Eventually Harkins noticed a pressure against his ribs. He looked down onto the tousled black hair. Which heart was it he felt knocking — Woodra's or his own? Pale violet filaments of some water weed clung to her neck. He reached out impulsively and brushed at them. She gave him a startled smile. "Are you recovered?" he said.

"I suppose so."

The five rescuers shuffled awkwardly apart, yet no one else spoke.

Harkins felt a desperate need to violate this resounding stillness. "Get us

as close as you can, McGuire."

Without answering, the droop-eyed pilot seated himself at the controls and snubbed the shuttle against the nearest sleeper. The seven bodies were bound together in a solid mat of vegetation. Thick roots punctured a stomach or thigh, emerged again from a shoulder or throat. Tendrils entered ears, wove between fingers and toes. The four men's faces all were bearded; the three women's heads were encircled by coronas of glistening hair. Violet threads enmeshed their skin, as if each one slept in a cocoon. Only their faces, their serene faces exposed to the air, were unencumbered.

"Can we cut them loose, Clemmons?"

The doctor stared at him blankly. "Cut, sir?"

"Can we hack them out of there without killing them?"

Clemmons surveyed the raft of bodies. Since the chanting had ceased, the chests no longer rose and fell, the diaphragms lay slack. "I'm not even sure they're alive, in a human sense," he said.

"Of course they're alive." Harkins thrust his gloved hand into the water and grasped the nearest sleeper by a wrist. It was a woman of thirty or so, with vanilla-colored hair and dark aureoles about her nipples like a pair of solemn eyes. He felt the frail mesh of filaments over her skin, felt a tendril where it fed into her wrist, but he could feel no pulse. Leaning out of the

shuttle as far as he dared, he groped through the vegetation for the wrist of a second body, then a third, and still he could detect no pulse.

He pulled his hand from the water, held it dripping just above the surface, as if it were a loathsome fish he had just landed. "How could they have made all that noise without a heartbeat?"

"Maybe the trees feed them enough to keep their brains going and their flesh intact," Clemmons suggested.

"But now they're not even breathing."

"If the roots provide them with oxygen, they'd only need their lungs during songtide."

"Why don't we look at their eyes," Woodra said quietly.

Harkins demanded, "What would that tell us?"

"Whether they'd like to be left in peace."

"Just abandoned here, in this quagmire?"

"They stripped away everything we could trace them by, didn't they?"

"Everything but their voices."

"I don't think they had any idea the mockingtrees would lead us to them," she said. "I think they found rapture here and yielded themselves to it and this is where they want to stay."

No one spoke for a while. They had all been touched by that rapture, as if a lover had brushed against them in the darkness. Even Harkins had felt the brief, tantalizing caress.

-He forced himself to say, 'We'll leave them alone for the time being. Let's dismantle the camp and get it ready for shipment home. Tomorrow we'll deal with our singers.'

All the domes and instruments, the knotted shimmersuits, the shucked-off skins of human enterprise were stowed neatly away in the scientists' shuttle. That left only the searchers' own shuttle for sleeping. The five of them stretched out as best they could in the cramped quarters.

Harkins lay awake for hours, thinking about that hideous tangle of flesh and roots, that enraptured music. He tried burrowing completely into his sleep-pouch, as the others had burrowed into theirs, to shut out light and the sound of breathing. But he felt smothered in the fabric's limp embrace. So he quickly wriggled out and lay on his side, head propped on one bent arm, gazing through the windows at the stumps glowing in the lavender twilight.

He lost all track of time, did not consult his watch, did not really care how the hours moved.

When he heard a faint singing, he thought at first it was the songtrees warming up for their cruel serenade. Then he realized the voice was single, frail, arising somewhere nearby. He sat up quietly. The three nearest pouches were sealed tight. The fourth, at the far end of the shuttle, was open, and

Woodra's upper body lay visible: black hair, pale throat, lemon-yellow sleepsuit clinging to her torso, bare arms flung negligently to either side.

Harkins rose and picked his way stealthily over the three sleeping forms. Beside the fourth he knelt. Her eyes were closed and the song gushed drowsily from her lips: "...Owl and pussycat went to sea in a beautiful peagreen boat." She heaved a deep sigh, shifted her arms, and resumed her singing: "They took some honey, and plenty of money, wrapped up in a five-pound note..."

Again she stretched, and he remembered her writhing in his arms.

Abruptly the voice died away and she opened her eyes. "Is something the matter?" she whispered.

"You were singing."

She rolled her head to the side. "I'm sorry."

"It was lovely. Something about an owl and a pussycat."

"Oh — that. Just a bit of rubbish I learned a long time ago."

"How does the rest of it go?"

Her face lolled toward again. "You're making fun of me."

"No, please," he whispered urgently, "I want to hear it."

"I can't remember most of it."

"Sing me what you remember."

She gazed at him skeptically with those green eyes. As if suddenly remembering her naked gleaming arms, she folded them in and crossed them on her breast. "The others will hear."

"They're sealed up in their pouches as snug as bugs in rugs."

A stifled giggle escaped her. "All right, bend down close." He leaned until he could feel her breath on his ear. She murmured, "My favorite bit goes like this: 'They sailed away for a year and a day, to the land where the bong-tree grows, and there in a wood a piggywig stood, with a ring at the end of his nose.'"

"Bongtrees?"

"I guess that's what made me remember the thing. Bongtrees, song-trees."

"What's a piggywig?"

"Oh," she said uncertainly, "it's a kind of farm animal they used to have." Waving both hands she sketched a fat shape in the air and ended with her arms flung wide, as if, had a piggywig wandered in, she would have embraced it. She could have embraced him as well. His face hovered only a hand's-breadth above hers. After a delicious hesitation, she let her arms fall.

He sat up self-consciously. "It must make it lively, having bongtrees and piggywigs and such things in your head."

"It gives a person something to sing in the middle of the night."

When he rocked back on his heels and made to rise, she grabbed his hand and said earnestly, "Are you going to leave them in peace, let them stay here and sing?"

"Would you?"

"Yes, yes. They'll die if you cut them loose."

"Clemmons might be able to revive them somehow, patch them together."

Her fingers closed fiercely on his hand. "No, leave them. Please."

"But I have to take them home. I'm a rescuer. My duty—"

"Is your duty more important than their desires? They want to be right where they are."

"How can you be sure?"

"Aren't you tempted? To cast everything aside and bare yourself and sink into that music? Aren't you? Aren't you?"

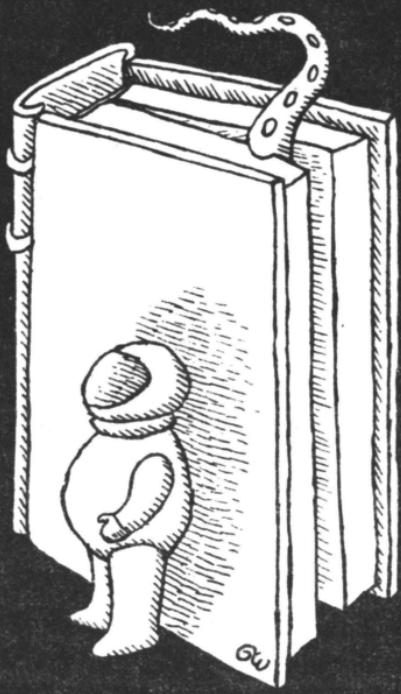
He did not know what to answer. But he would have to decide soon, because the songtrees were tuning up for their dawn chorus.

NOTICE TO ALL READERS

Beginning with the October 1982 issue, the single copy price of *F&SF* will increase to \$1.75. The new one-year subscription rate will be \$17.50. We have held the current price for more than two years, but this is no longer possible in the face of increasing costs. There is still time to subscribe at the old rates; see the coupon on page 116.

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Einstein Intersection, Samuel R. Delany, Bantam, \$2.50

Special Deliverance, Clifford D. Simak, Del Rey/Ballantine, \$12.50

The Azriel Uprising, Allyn Thompson, Bantam, \$2.50

The Golden Space, Pamela Sargent, Time-scape, \$15.50

Something old, something new,
something borrowed, something blue:

Old, but in a new package as one of Bantam's ongoing series of Delany reissues, is Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*, a 1967 work that won Delany yet another Nebula award. This is the one whose text begins:

There is a hollow, holey cylinder running from hilt to point in my machete. When I blow across the mouthpiece in the handle, I make music with my blade.

The Nicholls *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* article on Delany calls the wandering boy hero of this story a combination of Orpheus and Theseus, and characterizes the book as a compressed, allusive *tour de force*. That it is. It may also be, as Peter Nicholls says, the most satisfying of Delany's novels. Satisfaction being in the mind of the beholder, you might well either agree or disagree. (I tend toward Nicholls' view, although the later *Nova* had a harder initial impact on me.) The problem lies in determining whether one can be satisfied by a story

that does not explain itself so much as it exposes itself. If you like your story milieux fully diagrammed and meticulously explained, be warned that Nicholls' use of such terms as "allusive" is not a lightly chosen one.

But what makes this a book I highly recommend has not so much to do with its foreground action, which is sharply detailed where detailed at all, or with its sometimes very lightly sketched backgrounds. It has to do with the fact that here is where Delany's perennial Magic Kid first took a firm (bare) foothold as a recurring theme in his work.

The Magic Kid with his picaresque adventures roams through Delany over the years, turning up strongly recapitulated in *Dhalgren* and *Tales of Neveron* after a stopover in *Nova*. Usually he plays a musical instrument. In *Intersection*, of course, the pun on jazz slang is blatant. But even where he does not so plainly assign his lyrical gifts a delving, aggressive/defensive role in his passage through the forest labyrinths of reality, the Magic Kid for all his naivete takes care to keep an axe by him at all times.

In the case of this particular story, what seems to have happened is that aliens have taken over the world and are masquerading as human archetypes. Lo Lobey's consequent adventures, called "a retelling of the Orpheus legend" by Bantam, might alternatively be characterized as a brilliant but abashed young man's tour of his own

heroes, although surely Orpheus does seem to be paramount among them. I would guess the best way to enjoy this book is to read it, as distinguished from attempting to delve behind it, and just relax. Delany is no slouch as an entertainer.

But he is also one of SF's most conscious writers; a man who has persistently cast himself in the role of the serious critic and teacher. I hesitate to call that a game, for there is little it has in common with Ringalevio or Kick the Can, but it is surely something that any number can play on the instrument of their own choosing. So if you are the sort of SF person who wants to get a handle on some of the more abstruse levels to be found in its literature, and consider as I do that Delany is one of our outstanding contemporary examples of the writer who is exploring more than the maximum potential size of his royalty checks, here is one of the crucial places to explore.

Something new is Clifford D. Simak's *Special Deliverance*, a surrealistic novel, of all things, from a writer who is setting an astonishing pace of productivity and innovation for someone who got his Grand Master award some time ago and thus was, presumably, expected to retire to a porch and rock himself to sleep.

Simak's first published story appeared in 1931; since then, he has written all sorts of things, from *The Cosmic Engineers* on through the City

series and *Time and Again*, and the consensus is that he is SF's pastoralist. Most of us know him, I think, for the bucolic lyricism of his Middle Period, a long stretch of years that began after he abandoned the superscience mode of the 1930s, flowered in the *Astounding* of 1940s "Modern" science fiction, and still persists in much of his work; persists to a point where many readers probably think that's all he can do.

Well, the thing that leads me to point to a Middle Period for Simak is that *Special Deliverance* is in a mode so "not like Simak" that in a few years we may be looking back and seeing the demarcation plain.

There are woods and streams in this book; no one takes to them for comfort and spiritual renewal.

There is a robot in this book. He is neither obsequious nor sentimental about Humanity, he is not in search of God, he is not particularly resourceful, wise, or well-equipped. He's just trying to get from day to day like the rest of us.

There are three archetypical human figures: A soldier, a parson, and a poet, every one of whom moves like a cartoon of his or her central nature — as a good archetype should. There are also a female engineer and a male professor of literature. But like the robot, they represent the half of this principal cast who are individuals.

Then there are the innkeepers situated to give aid to parallel-world persons who have been transported by

various means to the planet where the action occurs. The help is capricious, the innkeepers are surly, the action is enigmatic, the dimensions and ecology of the planet suggest a neverland rather than a piece of astrophysical reality, and then there are the four cardplayers who speak to no one and can appear in a twinkling anywhere. That's in addition to the large blue cube, and the room whose firmly shut doorways lead to other worlds. Plus Extra Features.

Now, all of this, plus extra features, does not add up to an obvious overnight classic like *Time and Again* (also known as *First He Died* in some of its incarnations) or even a good consistent piece of work like *Ring Around the Sun* or *The Goblin Reservation*. There is too much of a sense that it is essentially a catalogue of wonders, through which the characters are walked by the author until the time comes to reveal the central gimmick which not only serves to close the book but readily could have closed it fifty thousand words sooner, not only could have occurred at any time but also affords the author an excuse never to have to explain any enigmatic loose end he might have left lying around. And I think some of them are loose ends, not pieces of allusion or allegory.

Even if I could be proved wrong — I wouldn't regret that — by Simak's offering a closely reasoned explanation of some hidden logic behind the seemingly arbitrary structure of events, I would not concede my central negative

criticism. It is not enough to be able to prove you had an organic reason for every word in a story; it is necessary to give the reader good reason to feel that you did and Simak does not fully accomplish that task. What I get instead is the feeling that he was not in full control of a new mode that had occurred to him, or that he was moving on faith rather than intellectually, in response to impulses he had not previously felt or permitted himself to act on, or both. But that is in itself marvelous.

We have over the past few years been treated to the spectacle of several literal or spiritual Grand Masters abandoning their accustomed storytelling skills. The problem has been that they have proffered this negative act as an act of sufficient creation, saying, in effect, "Look — I have made ... a hole!"

And that is where the Simak is not like *The Number of The Beast* or *Golem*¹⁰⁰. It is an act of positive exploration; of a willingness to turn the hand to new forms, to respond to pulses even when one is not yet fully comfortable with them. It is the thing beginning writers do; they feel something stirring in them, and they dare to try it. Why not? They have no reputations to lose, no established body of readers to risk baffling and disappointing. More important — because I think there is in truth a less crass way to view this — they haven't yet found the mode in which they feel they know what they're doing.

An older writer — an older, famous writer — may or may not be a crass marketer. But one thing is sure; every person-Jack and -Jill of us sits down to insecurity each time we sit down to the typewriter. No matter how many hundreds of times we've done it, each time might be the time when the half-felt idea simply refuses to take coherent form. The pressure to not attempt what hasn't already worked becomes enormous and pervasive.

There are, I'm convinced, ideas that are examined, judged and stifled before we even become conscious of them ... ideas which never get the chance to present themselves for acceptance or rejection by what we only think are the creative faculty's primary evaluative mechanisms. Because a writer's worst case isn't the absence of a story idea. It's the idea we can't make work. There's where the ego twists and shrinks, and the voice begins to say: "You were never any good." The longer a career a writer has, the likelier it seems that some ego-salving mechanism acts to prevent moments when all of it in retrospect seems worthless and foolish. The side effect is that the work done is less and less fresh. Shy of the very thing that makes it.

And the secondary side effect can be disastrous. In rebellion against this output of old mixtures in supposedly new packages, a writer's fundamental commitment to continued creativity

may lead to the sincere production of holes, and the flourishing of them as evidence that the writer has not stultified. That is a sad species of evidence which in the end convinces only the person producing it.

When I look at the scope and complexity of that trap, I'm amazed anyone ever evades it. And this is why I'm particularly heartened by *Special Deliverance*. It's not perfect; it is new, it is fearless, it is, thereby, a deeply innocent piece of work, informed not by its creator's learned managerial skills but by an open reliance on his reservoir of talent ... on his faith that it still, after all these years, knows more about itself than he does.

The man is 78 years old. He was born the year after someone finally managed to get an aircraft a few feet off the ground and fly it, in a straight line, a few hundred steps into the wind. Albert Einstein was 25. Arthur Eddington was 22. T.S. Eliot was 16. Jean Cocteau was 13. Radium was six. When Simak was five, the North Pole was discovered.

He was born, so to speak, by gas light. Though I imagine that in Millville, Wisconsin, the first tang in his nostrils was the omnipresent reek of kerosene lamps.

When he was three, the Marconi Company announced a regular service for wireless telegraphy across the void of the Atlantic. When he was ten, the Panama Canal was opened. When he was 13, the last Czar of All the Russias

abdicated; Cuba, 19 years after its liberation from Spain by the United States, joined the U.S. in declaring war on Germany; Buffalo Bill Cody died.

And Clifford Donald Simak has written a new book.

Something borrowed is the story of America casting off the yoke of Soviet occupation. *The Azriel Uprising* is the first novel from Allyn Thompson, about whom Bantam furnishes no further information except that she lives in New York City.

This is of course one of the most popular subgenres of SF, not all of them generated as SF by their authors' intention. Generically, we can call them "World War III" stories, beginning, I suppose, somewhere around 1871 with Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking*, although there are isolated earlier examples fitting the category I have in mind.*

Many SF readers and writers are fascinated by them, and — setting aside such works as *The Shape of*

**The actual third world war is not, I believe, a comprehensible event. Some military historian/philosophers have attempted to describe it technically, and I wish them more luck than that of their confreres prior to World War II, who invariably got it ludicrously wrong. I doubt anyone will be around to judge that aspect of the matter. The "World War III" I have in mind is the shibboleth for that situation in which all social order is abrogated and the opportunity to administer one's own justice will arrive as a reality rather than a delicious dream.*

Things to Come — the tradition is rich with stories like *Final Blackout*, *Sixth Column*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *The Long Loud Silence*, and George Allan England's *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* before them. The most prominent example of a major SF writer's projection of a specifically Soviet-occupied America is, of course, Cyril Kornbluth's *Not this August*. On some levels, the latter book is a seriously intended study of how it would actually be, allowing for his restricting his scope to one rural county in New York state, and forgiving him for pulling a bomb-carrying rabbit out of his hat in order to enable the ultimate overthrow of the invaders.

The thing is, anytime a book of this sort comes along, it potentially is of interest for possibly valid speculation on how it might really be and on what valid steps, taken within the U.S. by surviving Americans, might offer a hope of liberation. (The prognosis is terrible; no "Underground" has ever succeeded by itself in truly dispossessing a fully vested occupying army. It needs massive outside support backed by a vigorous military/industrial complex. In the case of a Soviet-occupied U.S.A., no such outside power would exist if you don't count the Chinese. So Kornbluth's "gimmick" is in fact an ingenious means of getting around this truth.)

Warfare-buffs in the SF ranks can save their money; Thompson knows little of tactics, nothing of strategy or

logistics, and very little about the Soviet Union, its methods and resources. She knows nothing about clandestine warfare in any of its forms. She knows a little bit about military organization and nomenclature. If the U.S.A. were invaded tomorrow, and she survived the first wave, she would then get herself killed in the countryside rather than in the city, and kill with her anyone foolish enough to take her advice. On that level, this book is pure wish-fulfillment fantasy.

How is it as an action-drama replete with violence and sex? Not bad. Not great, in places not even good; but, overall, not bad. It's still wish-fulfillment even on that level, but a great deal of speculative fiction is that, very nearly by definition, and if she gets her military science all wrong, well, many an entertaining SF story, full of "circumstantial" details, has been written around ludicrous science of one sort or another. Where it hobbles itself there is in consistently depicting the menace as inept. You can call them Russians, you can call whatever you please; when they never pose a serious threat, and most of the time bend over backwards not to be present, that's a dramatically weak story.

What it has going for it as a thriller is propulsion. There's no way of telling how firmly Thompson believed she was describing possible events; that is, how much she was pulled along by her story, and how much she was simply pushing words into place. But the

effect is that there's something going on constantly, there's always action just around the corner, and although the circumstances are impossible, their sometimes convincingly grubby details take on a cloak of realism.

The lead character is a woman; a former white-collar professional with a husband and children, who has been honed down into a killing machine. Thompson also makes her a general and a leading strategist in the underground army, which is going a bit much for someone who spends ninety percent of her time as a lone improvisor of ad hoc operations in the bush. And she makes her a living legend across the length and breadth of the U.S. But when these romantic touches are irrelevant to what "Juanita" is doing at the moment, Juanita — otherwise "Azriel" — moves and talks like a genuine hero.

If the Hebraic angel of death can be a woman, then a woman can be a hero. "Heroine" has been pre-empted by wimps. And one of the competent things Thompson does in this story is her better-than-average depiction of the relationship between Juanita/Azriel and her male subordinate. Juanita is not just Robert Jordan with bumps on his chest, and Lieutenant Colonel Beauregard Manigault Bevis, USAF — Bo for short — ain't no little *guapa* in horizon-blue boxer shorts.

They are not simply role-reversed; we are dealing with action drama, mind you, with its inherent limitations

in depth of characterization, but within those limitations these two people can actually be glimpsed as people, and I found myself from time to time completely forgetting that eight-tenths of what they were doing was pure nonsense. What I was seeing was a complex human relationship, believably cast, of a sort one does not often see in fiction or in contemporary life, remarkably free of either pre-Lib or post-Lib clichés.

Considering the way the plot waxes and wanes in believability, and eventually trails off into perfunctory and utter nonsense, trying to find a reason for the presence of Commander Bettina, a retired WAC who serves mostly as a mother-figure for Bo, I have to wonder if perhaps these relationships, rather than the surface hurly-burly, are what Thompson on some level wanted the book to be mostly about. And if so, I would like to see her next book.

Something blue is the cover of Pamela Sargent's *The Golden Space*,^{*} a long-enough, thoughtful, well-crafted novel made by incorporating shorter works (e.g., "The Summer's Dust," F&SF July '81) and bridging out from them.

Sargent's central thrust is the exploration of immortality's psychological effects, an area sparsely explored. It is

*And you thought I was going to talk about Charles Panati's *The Pleasuring of Rory Malone*. Tsk, tsk.

true that there are SF stories by the gross in which immortal characters appear. These usually go around saying "I am old!" in about the same way that male writers used to have their female characters declare "I am a woman, but...." Sargent's major accomplishment in her novel is the presentation of character traits and situations that convince.

Her approach is edited-panoramic; the story contains several nearly independent lines which barely intersect. In some cases, if you don't look sharp you'll miss the connections completely. It also picks up some of these lines *in medias res*, drops them in the same manner, and returns to them from some completely different viewpoint in which they become minor references. The alternative — the novel in which all of these lines are intricately interwoven, and in which each story is followed through from beginning to end with full development — would have been technically the same sort of book as *War and Peace*, I think. Therefore, it's the experienced SF reader, able to supply the missing details from a repertoire of familiarity with how SF goes, who will get the most out of this book. There's a lot to be gotten.

Usually, when you see a book put together from magazine pieces that originally had little overt connection, and the book narrative nevertheless fails to present a fully cohesive tale, the tendency is to consider this a failed or careless project. We have seen so many

of these, you and I, that the tendency now is to over-react. But what is happening in *The Golden Space* is that the author is concerned almost exclusively with how her characters are shaped by successive events, and not so much with the progress of the events. That aspect of the book coheres very nicely. If it does not seem to, then a re-reading of the book will prove to be rewarding. And when is the last time you found me recommending that radical procedure?

The basic situation is this:

Some time in the near future, genetic engineering reaches a point at which organic rejuvenation becomes possible. Immortality becomes a fact. This undermining of the fundamental conditioner of all human social interaction produces chaos, and there is a political interregnum from which the survivors emerge so traumatized that they are loathe to research their own pasts. Life becomes life lived for the present — here is one of Sargent's major insights — even though the present is an endless one; the cutoff is not merely from mortality but from history. The life of the immortal is bleak not because there is a prospect of boredom but because it has no context. Death is feared not because an endless future is to be lost; it is repellent because it has no meaning. And death still does occur — by accident, by murder, and by suicide. Suicide has inevitably been made religious.

There are two kinds of immortals:

those born before the interregnum, and thus with connections to mortal humanity and its society, and those born immortal. Their personalities and motivations are thus fundamentally dissimilar.

Enabled as they are by their biological science, some humans begin producing altered forms — "kobolds," and such-like — to act as semintelligent servants. Others attempt to produce a superior race, while still others attempt to create a culture of neoterics (to borrow Theodore Sturgeon's term): mortal, untutored humanoids whose brains are organically incapable of abstract thought, who might inherit the earth and to whom humans are as gods.

With the collapse of all pre-interregnal religions, death cults spring up. One of the most interesting pretends to itself that it is no such thing. Instead, it ritualizes temporary death. It kills its adherants long enough for them to see the Kubler-Ross "white light," then revives them. The concept of an afterlife, and a human soul to attain to it, is thus technologically reintroduced — for those who believe in the objective existence of the white light. Sargent uses this aspect of her story with a particularly masterful deftness; from this point on, any proposition that this is a slipshod or casually conceived work becomes a very difficult thesis indeed.

As I've said, there are no strong,

continuous, fully realized narrative threads, although as I've also said, Sargent supplies enough material so that we, knowing what adventure stories other writers have set in the land under the impregnable force-dome, in the citadel of the immortals, in the universe of the Feathered Serpent and the Mayans, in the colony of Odd John, in the culture of abandoned villas and faithful android servants, etc., etc., will have little trouble working out the details for ourselves. I don't think it's an accident that Sargent has deliberately cued her many references to settings well enshrined in SFnal racial memory. I think it's shorthand. What she did her intensive work on was what is new, in deliberate contrast to the old and borrowed. And if the prevailing mood is melancholy, well, the central message is that human beings are ingenious and persistent enough to defeat even immortality.

Clearly, *The Golden Space* is a major intellectual achievement of SF literature. It will not be possible for any honest story of immortality hereafter to ignore it; it is a landmark. If some might have wished for the bulging volume of work required for Sargent to also satisfy those who want it all laid out all the way, the fact is that there are some potential tasks which rightly cause an artist to conclude that life's too short.



In which the wizard Kedrigern attempts to work some delicate magic while suffering from a hangover. The results are not entirely satisfactory.

The Crystal of Caracodissa

BY

JOHN MORRESSY

K

Kedrigern crept from his study, pale and bloodshot of eye, and shut the door behind him with trembling hands. He made his way to the breakfast nook of the cottage, walking like a man made of glass, and paused on the threshold of the sun-washed room to sigh and swallow loudly. Narrowing his eyes to slits and shielding them with his hand, he entered, slowly.

Princess was already seated. She looked particularly fresh and lovely in a soft green robe, with her black hair loose about her shoulders. Kedrigern scarcely noticed. On this particular morning, Venus herself would have made little impression on him.

"Brreeep?" Princess asked politely.

"Terrible, thank you," Kedrigern replied, gingerly lowering himself into the seat opposite her.

"Brreeep," she said, with a tight, self-righteous smile.

"No, it does not serve me right, my dear, and it's unkind of you to say so. I had no choice in the matter," said Kedrigern in a fragile voice. He listened to his stomach gurgle threateningly, gulped, and went on: "I know what kind of stuff the wood-witch brews, and I watered my drinks as much as I decently could. She just kept refilling my bowl."

"Brreeep."

"You don't know Bess, my dear. She's a good-hearted old thing, but she takes it terribly to heart if you refuse a drink in her hovel, and I didn't dare risk offending her." Kedrigern gave a shuddering, desolate sigh. "I don't know how she survives it. Her stomach must be lined with stone. I wouldn't offer that stuff to an alchemist."

"Brreeep?"

"Worse than that. I think it would paralyze a full-grown troll."

As if on cue, the troll-of-all-work

came skidding into the breakfast nook on huge flat feet. "Yah! Yah!" it shrieked in jubilant greeting, an arm's length from Kedrigern's ear. He made a little whimpering sound and buried his face in his hands.

"No, Spot. Quiet, please," he said faintly. "Please."

The little housetroll waited by his knee, big-eyed, panting and salivating, while the wizard recovered. Kedrigern rubbed his eyes gingerly, then blinked and glanced down on Princess' plate, on which lay a thin slice of bread covered with strawberry preserves. He quickly shut his eyes again.

"Plain porridge, Spot. A very small serving. A dab. And bring it silently," he said.

Spot careened out noiselessly, ears and big hands flapping, like a skiff crowded with a three-master's full complement of sail. Kedrigern looked again at Princess. Her expression of superior disapproval was unchanged.

"I wasn't too bad last night, was I?" he asked.

"Brreeep."

"I did? Funny ... I don't remember that at all. Are you positive?"

"Brreeep!" she said indignantly.

Kedrigern raised his hands before him defensively. "Certainly, my dear. If you say so. I'm terribly sorry."

She glared at him, but said nothing.

"I didn't ... I didn't try to work any magic, did I?" he asked apprehensively.

She solemnly shook her head.

Kedrigern let out a deep sigh of re-

lief. "I'm glad to hear that. Working spells when one is not fully ... when one has had ... well, it's irresponsible. I've known of conventions where everyone wound up invisible just because some silly wizard ... anyway, we don't have *that* to worry about."

Princess did not look comforted by this observation. She did not speak. Spot caromed into the breakfast nook, eased a bowl of porridge and milk silently onto the tabletop, and departed. Kedrigern ate, in small, cautious helpings, and still she was silent. At last he laid down his spoon and looked directly into her eyes.

"In any event, my dear, I got what I was after. It meant a long trip, and hard bargaining, and an excruciating hangover. The price was absolutely outrageous. But it was all worthwhile," he announced.

"Brreeep?"

"More than that. Much more. I had to give Bess a full vial of dragon's blood. But I don't begrudge a drop of it. What's dragon's blood for, anyway? I'd gladly spend all I've got to make you happy."

"Brreeep?" she asked. Her voice was somewhat softened.

"All for you, and you alone, my dear." Kedrigern reached out and gently laid his fingertips on her hand. "It's your anniversary present: the crystal of Caracodissa. At this very moment it stands on my work table. And as soon as my head is clear —"

She squeezed Kedrigern's hand in

both of hers. With a croak of sheer joy, she jumped up, ran to his side, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him repeatedly. He took her in his arms and held her close.

"I was going to keep it for a surprise, but I suppose it's just as well you know about it," he murmured.

"Brereep?" she asked in a whisper.

"Oh, no doubt at all. It's the genuine article. I know the markings too well to be fooled. The inscription runs all the way around it, in letters that burn like fire:

Magic of the helping kind,
Seek it here, and ye shall find,
Wake the spirit that indwells,
Find the spell to loose all spells....

I'll work on it first thing tomorrow morning, and by dinnertime tomorrow you'll be speaking as clearly as ever you did."

She drew away and looked perplexedly at Kedrigern. "Brereep?" she asked.

"No, tomorrow. Please, my dear. My head is throbbing. I can barely focus my eyes. I'm in no condition —"

"Brereep!" she cried.

"Of course I love you!" Kedrigern said, wincing at the loudness of her voice. "We're dealing with very delicate magic here, my dear. I can't undertake it lightly. I must have a clear head, and at the moment —"

"Brereep?" she suggested.

"No, I can't. There's nothing that can cure a hangover. Not even magic. We'll just have to wait until tomorrow. Surely, one more day won't be so bad

to endure, will it, my dear?"

Princess slumped dejectedly. She sat huddled by his chair, looking up at him with wide, sad eyes. A tear welled up in each eye, brimmed, and coursed down her pale cheeks.

"My dear, I really can't. A great deal of preliminary study is required. It would be very risky to barge ahead."

She gave a little sob. More tears came. She buried her lovely face in her hands and wept, silently.

Kedrigern's resolve lasted less than a minute. Rising, he laid his hand on her shoulder and said, "Perhaps I can do something today, after all. If Spot can bring me a cold compress —"

Princess sprang to her feet and clapped her hands once, sharply. Kedrigern twitched at the sound, which brought Spot reeling into the breakfast nook.

"A bowl of very cold water, and a clean cloth, Spot. Bring them to my study at once. And don't make a sound," said the wizard in a low, strained voice.

The cold compress helped ever so slightly. Kedrigern wiped his brow, dried his wet fingertips on his robe, and turned his attention to the crystal cube that stood in a cleared place on his long work table. Princess, too, gazed on it with fascination.

It was a perfect cube of flawless crystal, about a hand's length to a side, and it glowed from within, where a

misty radiance swirled through it like a fiery soul. Around four sides, in letters of reddish-gold that flickered like living flame, ran the inscription. In the darkened room, Kedrigern read the familiar words, turning the crystal cube slowly as he spoke:

'Wake the spirit that indwells,
Seek it here, and ye shall find.
Find the spell to loose all spells,
Magic of the helping kind...."

Something nudged his memory. He had not been at his most alert when he read the inscription earlier, but it seemed to him that the verses had been in different order. He picked up the cube, turned it over in his hands — it was oddly light in weight — and setting it down, read the inscription once more:

"Seek it here, and ye shall find,
Wake the spirit that indwells,
Magic of the helping kind,
Find the spell to loose all spells...."

He let out a deep groan and reached for the compress. This was going to be more difficult than he had expected. Princess, seeing his look of concern, lent her aid, plunging the cloth into the bowl, wringing out the excess water, and applying the soothing compress gently to Kedrigern's forehead. He accepted her ministrations silently, his eyes fixed on the glowing crystal surface.

"This is not going to be simple, my dear. Not simple, at all. What we have here is a permutational spell ... very tricky thing to deal with," Kedrigern said abstractedly. He turned and start-

ed to say, "It really would be best to wait until I..." but the abandoned look in Princess' eyes silenced him.

He returned his attention to the cube. The radiance at its center was slowly swirling, like dyes dropped carefully into still water. He whispered a melodious phrase, and then another. The glow deepened, and clotted. He gestured for Princess to go to the opposite side of the table, facing him, and as she moved he took up a longer incantation in an utterly strange language of soft liquid syllables which flowed into one another without pause.

When Princess stood opposite him, he reached out, took her hands, and placed her palms flat against the sides of the cube. He placed his own hands over hers. The light within the crystal drew in upon itself, congealed, and solidified into a golden cube within a cube.

Kedrigern's head was throbbing painfully. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. He blinked it away, staring hard at the letters slowly coming into sight on the face on the inner cube. The print was tiny, the light was painfully bright, his vision was blurry, and his head felt as if it were about to burst into flame, but there was no stopping now. Squinting and cocking his head, he read off the words of the unbinding spell as one by one they came into view. When he spoke the final word, the golden cube burst into a million tiny fragments of light that glowed, and faded, and left the

crystal and the room in semidarkness.

Princess was slumping forward, dazed. Kedrigern rushed around the table just in time to catch her as she fell. He carried her to their bedroom, placed her on the bed, and summoned Spot.

"Get the cold water and the cloth from my study, Spot. Bring them here at once," he ordered.

Princess was a bit pale, but her breath and heartbeat were regular. Kedrigern began to swab her brow and cheeks as soon as Spot arrived, and in a very short time, her eyelids fluttered. He set to wiping his own brow as she opened her eyes, looked up at him, and smiled.

"How do you feel, my dear?" he asked.

".well Very .Well," she said.

Kedrigern gave a great sigh of relief. "I'm so glad to hear. For a moment there ... I had some difficulty making out the words of the spell, you see. But apparently, I got it right."

She frowned, shook her head, and said, ".wrong it got you think I, No"

"What?"

"!backwards thing silly the recited You"

"Backwards?"

".backwards, right That's"

"Oh, dear."

"?say can you all *that* Is"

"Well ... at least I didn't recite the spell sideways, my dear," Kedrigern said brightly, grasping at the first positive circumstance that occurred to him.

"There's no telling what you might sound like if I'd done that. This way, if you're careful, and you work hard —"

"?life my of rest the for backwards talking be I Will ?careful, mean you do What !Careful"

"Oh, dear," Kedrigern repeated.

"!say to you for Easy ?dear, Oh"

"Look at it this way: it's a start. You're speaking, and that's the important thing."

".Backwards," she muttered.

"It's better than croaking, isn't it? If you just keep to simple sentences, everything will be fine. Meanwhile, I'll read over everything I have on the crystal of Caracodissa and permutational spells, and we can try it again in a few days. Everything's going to be all right. You'll see," Kedrigern said cheerfully.

Princess looked up at him, still dubious, but trying not to show her doubts. She was, after all, speaking. And it was an improvement over croaking. At last she smiled and held out her hands to him. ".up me Help," she said.

Kedrigern was much relieved when she rose, stretched, and then walked out of the bedroom in completely normal fashion. When, at dinner, she did not begin with dessert and end with soup, he was reassured. And when Princess showed no sign of waking up before going to sleep that night, his mind was put completely at ease. The spell had affected only her speech. Kedrigern was confident that given

time to bone up, and a clear head, he could set everything to rights.

He spent the next day in his study, reading closely. When he came out, in midafternoon, to take a short breather, he received a shock to see Princess preparing an upside-down cake for dessert that evening; but it turned out to be sheer coincidence. He sat down, relieved, on the kitchen bench.

"?hard working you Are," she asked.

"Yes. The crystal of Caracodissa is an amazingly complicated device. It seems that whenever one summons up the spell, it appears in slightly different form on each face of the crystal. Only one form is the right one, but there's no way to tell which it is."

Princess frowned in puzzlement. ".one only saw I ?six were there sure you Are"

"Whichever face you look into appears to be the only one with a spell showing. It was centuries before a witch named Moggrapple discovered the secret."

"?mirrors use you Could"

"Moggrapple tried just that. She surrounded the crystal with mirrors, five of them, and recited all six spells one after the other, as fast as she could. She's been trapped in the mirrors ever since, five of her, and no one knows the spell to get her out. No one is sure which is the real Moggrapple, either; so they can't try anything drastic. I don't think it pays to get too clever with the crystal."

"?do you will What"

"If we have one chance in six of finding the right spell, I suppose we just have to keep trying."

"....now, minute a Wait," Princess said, holding up her hands.

"It didn't hurt at all, did it?"

"No," she admitted.

"And you did get your voice back."

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Well, there you are. We'll try again tomorrow morning. There's nothing to worry about," Kedrigern said confidently.

"?out-inside Or ?sideways talking start I if What"

"You're worrying yourself unnecessarily, my dear," said Kedrigern, rising. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few references to check out. I'll be working late tonight, I'm afraid. I want to have everything ready for tomorrow morning."

T

The next morning, both Princess and Kedrigern were too edgy to eat a proper breakfast. Spot had scarcely cleared away their half-emptied plates when they went hand in hand to Kedrigern's study. Kedrigern at once began to bustle about, covering his nervousness with activity and a stream of chatter.

"Now, if you'll take your place at the other side, just as you did yesterday ... that's right, my dear, right there ... hands by your side, relaxed ... nothing to worry about," he said in a gentle, reassuring voice. "I'll just clear

away these empty bowls ... there we are. Now, I'll turn the crystal so ... and see what happens when I read the spell in the next face. It won't be any time at all, you'll see. I'll read the spell, and you'll be speaking beautifully. Forwards. Only one or two little things to attend to before we ... there ... and there...."

"lit with on get, Oh," Princess said sharply.

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," Kedrigern said with a soothing gesture. "I'm practically finished. There. Now. Are you ready, my dear?"

"Yes," she said through clenched teeth.

He nodded, took a deep breath, and commenced the summoning of the spirit in the cube. At his first words, the inner radiance came to life, and stirred, and began to glow. It twisted and spun, sinuous and slow, and Kedrigern began the incantation that would raise it to readiness.

Motes and streamers of light danced in the crystal cube, ever closer and denser, moving in upon one another until a single glowing sphere hung shimmering in the center. Kedrigern reached for Princess' cool hands, placed them on the sides of the crystal, and covered them with his own, just as he had done before. The light formed a brilliant inner cube. Once again, letters began to take shape before Kedrigern's eyes, and he read off the spell slowly revealed to him.

As the last words left his lips, the

light burst into fragments. Kedrigern looked up quickly. Princess stared at the crystal, vacant-eyed, for a moment, then looked at him, fully alert and aware.

"No, it isn't," she said.

"Is everything all right?" Kedrigern asked anxiously.

"Well, I'm not. Something's gone wrong again."

"You sound fine, my dear."

"Listen to me! I'm one sentence ahead of you, that's what happened!" Princess cried.

"What could have happened?"

"— Ridiculous!"

"But that's —"

Kedrigern waved his hands frantically for silence and restraint. Princess folded her arms like a gate shutting and glared at him with Armageddon in her blue eyes. With a flurry of reassuring gestures, Kedrigern prepared for an immediate new attempt. He gave the crystal a quarter-turn. He wiped his damp forehead on his sleeve, rubbed his eyes, took three deep calming breaths, and for the third time, spoke the words of summoning.

The light this time was sluggish, moving slowly as honey in the center of the crystal cube. Kedrigern could sense the reluctance of the indwelling spirit; but once having begun, he could not turn back. That was one of the basic rules of the wizard's trade.

When the summoning phrases were done, Kedrigern paused for breath. The cube was faintly glowing now,

with a sallow, grudging light. Princess had relaxed; her hands were by her sides, and her eyes were fixed on the crystal.

Kedrigern began the incantation. The inner light swirled fitfully, like a fish on a line, but its color brightened and deepened. As it gathered, Princess placed her palms against the sides, and Kedrigern enclosed her hands in his. The light rose, and flared, and died, and they stood in the faint light, exhausted, their bowed heads almost touching over the crystal cube.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Kedrigern asked when he had his breath under control.

Princess nodded. She took a long, deep breath, then another, and raised her eyes to meet Kedrigern's.

"Say something. Just a short phrase will do. Anything," Kedrigern said.

She cleared her throat. "Peererb," she said.

Kedrigern recoiled in shock but quickly recovered his poise. "We'll try again, my dear! A few minutes' rest, that's all we need, and then we'll try again," he said quickly.

"Peererb! Peererb!" Princess cried, enraged.

"Now, my dear, you must be patient. These things happen sometimes. It's a momentary setback, nothing more. You mustn't let it — Princess,

what are you doing!?"

Kedrigern sprang forward an instant too late. Princess swept up the crystal of Caracodissa in both hands and raised it over her head. With a furious "Peererb," that drowned Kedrigern's cry of horror, she hurled it with all her might to the stone floor.

From the wreckage rose a myriad motes of golden light. They merged, and danced together in a glimmering spiral, and then, with a tinkle of crystalline laughter, the spirit of the crystal of Caracodissa floated out a crack in the shutters and vanished into the light of day, free at last.

"Princess!" Kedrigern cried, dashing to her side.

She flew to his arms, and he clasped her tightly, to still her trembling and conceal his own. "It's all over, my dear," he said gently. "The spirit of the crystal was obviously determined not to be helpful. Malignant lot, those imprisoned spirits. I should have known. We're well rid of it. I promise you, I'll have you talking again as soon as I possibly can. I'll leave no spell unwoven until you're speaking as sweetly as ever. But we've had enough magic for one day, and enough talk of magic. We've earned a holiday, I think. Let's have Spot make up a picnic. What do you say to that?"

"Brereep," she said.



Barbara Owens, a Californian, was born and raised in Illinois and graduated from college with a BFA in theatre. Her stories have appeared in several magazines and anthologies; one, "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves," won the MWA's Edgar award for best mystery short story of 1978.

Happy Birthday, Little Elroy

BY

BARBARA OWENS



At dawn it looked like any other day. Another hot one; early on the sky began to quiver at its edges with an ominous haze. By mid morning every farmer and his lathered plow horse would be counting the steps to the next clump of shade and a short rest from the white prairie sun. Just an ordinary day.

Except that it was not.

It was Little Elroy's birthday.

The family assembled at the breakfast table in rare high spirits — even the baby. She was too young yet to know about the Way, but she caught the holiday mood anyway, squealing and banging her tin cup with glee. For once everyone was present; Elroy's big brother clumped downstairs and fell into his chair just in time. Elroy's mother hummed a little tune as she heaped piles of hot tender pancakes on each plate.

Elroy's father hooked his thumbs in his overall bib, hawked and spit a juicy one out the open kitchen door. A fat white hen squawked up and flapped away.

"Well, boy," his father said, grinning, "no work for you today. The big day's finally here. Your first time. Hope you been thinking how to use the Way."

Little Elroy smiled, saying nothing.

"Ten years old!" his mother clucked, passing the molasses. "Goodness, almost a man already!" She seemed about to pat him, but just then the baby upset her cup and his mother drifted away. Elroy gave the baby a long level look.

Elroy's big brother snorted. "A man! That's a hot one. He ain't nothin' but a skinny runt."

Their father's fist caught him casually alongside the head, and in a

minute he climbed meekly back into his chair, muttering, "Sorry, kid. I didn't mean nothing."

"Leave off Little Elroy today," their father said mildly. "It's special, that first time you get to use the Way." He turned to Elroy. "Remember, boy, it's a family trust; been handed down for generations. Think careful on it. Once you done it, it can't be undone for a whole year, understand?" Little Elroy nodded, something prowling behind his eyes.

Elroy's brother snickered, smacking fat lips. "Boy, I sure could use me another year like I give myself two years ago. All them girls — not one could say no all year long."

"He can't do that for you," their father said. "You know you can't never use the Way for the same thing twice."

"I know, but I sure could use another year like that one."

Elroy watched the wet grins pass between them. He looked at his big brother's pimples and close-set eyes, remembering how his brother hadn't been able to get a girl since the Way ran out. He smiled inside; the good feeling grew.

"My favorite year was when I had me the money tree," his father was saying. "Remember that year, Ma?"

"My, yes," she murmured, spooning pancakes into the baby's greedy face. "That was fine. We was so rich that year."

"And how about — "

They were off. He was forgotten. Runty Little Elroy, the quiet one, the thinker. Nobody ever paid him much mind. He squinted around the table, bringing each one into sharp clear focus; his heart began to pound. His mother's face wore the special birthday smile; she was trying to keep the baby's sticky fingers out of her hair. His father and brother, faces sweaty, were shouting and pounding on the table, trying to outdo each other in the telling. The dark old kitchen was hot and close. Elroy's ears started to buzz.

"Anything?" he asked suddenly. "I can have anything I want?"

His little voice squeaked into a second's silence. Their heads snapped toward him; they'd forgotten he was there. His father blinked.

"That's right," he said. "Anything. Think it — and it's done. I never known anything to fail."

"Can I start right now?"

"Anytime after sunup. Be careful now, you only got till sundown." He hitched closer to Elroy and laid a heavy hand on his skinny shoulder. "Now I ain't asked for anything," he said, grinning close to Elroy's face. "But any little thing you want to do for your old Pa will be all right. Happy birthday, Little Elroy."

"Happy birthday," his mother and brother echoed. The baby burbled and drooled. Elroy sat up straight. His chest felt tight. He folded his hands on the worn oilcloth; their expectant faces watched his every move.

"I been doing a lot of thinking," he said. "I believe I'm ready to begin."

His brother giggled. "Yeah? Yeah?"

"First off," Elroy said slowly, I ain't going to school."

There was silence. "Ain't going to school?" his father repeated.

Little Elroy watched them. "There ain't no school to go to. I believe right about now the schoolhouse has fell in." His family's blank faces stared. "And every time someone tries to build it up, I believe it will fall in again."

"Now — now, wait a minute, Elroy," his father said. "Don't that mean no one else can go either?"

"That's so."

"Well, now, that's kind of a bad thing. I don't believe it's right to use the Way for bad things."

Elroy gave him a sly smile. "Pa, you said the Way is to get anything you really want — special presents to last a whole year."

"That's true."

"So if I give myself a present of not going to school, I don't see how a present can be a bad thing."

"Well," his father started, and stopped.

"Little Elroy's always been a thinker," his mother beamed.

"So — no school." He turned his gaze on his brother. "Last year Stinky Littlejohn beat me up most every day after school. Sometimes I seen you right nearby, but you never made him quit, and Stinky Littlejohn's about three times as big as me." His brother's

grin wobbled. "Remember on your birthday I asked you to get me some big muscles so I could whip Stinky Littlejohn? How come you wouldn't do it?"

His brother looked into Little Elroy's eyes and swallowed loud. "I — uh — I'm truly sorry, Elroy. I thought you'd prob'ly — uh — forgot that by now."

Elroy smiled. "I ain't forgot a thing. I been waiting for this day a long, long time."

With a happy squeal, baby sister dumped the molasses pot on the floor. It smashed into pieces. Nobody moved, and after a while Elroy stood up slowly.

"What — what you aiming to do, Elroy?" his brother asked.

"I got some things to do in town. Ma, I believe I'd like a chocolate birthday cake with fresh blackberries." At the door he turned. They watched him. "I'll be back."

Out the gate and down the road he sauntered. Once he looked back; they were all lined up on the sagging front porch, watching him go.

The sun hung down from a blue metal sky, but Elroy stepped along smartly, bare feet raising dust puffs in the narrow dirt road. He practiced thinking big. That was the trouble with them — dumb, they didn't think big. He was only ten, but already he was beginning to get the hang of it. When he came to old man Willey's stubble field he cut across, and heard the old man yelling at him from the barn. Lit-

tle Elroy narrowed his eyes and sauntered on. He began to sing softly: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you."

He covered the two miles to town, and when he came to the place where the schoolhouse had been, he paused. Everyone was standing around shaking their heads at the pile of glass and bricks. "Don't see how it could've just fell down like that," someone said. Little Elroy strolled on.

He was just coming up on the town square when a large rock whistled by his ear. Elroy ducked and spun. Stinky Littlejohn was behind him and closing fast. Instantly Elroy started to run. Then he stopped.

"Bet that Reb soldier's getting tired," he murmured. "I believe old Stinky ought to be up there."

He waited a minute, then sneaked a cautious look over his shoulder. The street behind him was bare. He strolled to the statue in the center of the square. The soldier leaned forward on his pedestal, hat low over his eyes; Elroy had to look real close to see that it was Stinky's face. He looked at it a while, picked up a rock, considered it, then chunked it solid into the soldier's belly. Somewhere deep inside the stone he heard a strangled howl. "Hey yourself, Stinky," Elroy said. Whistling through his teeth, he walked away. Behind him, the soldier boasted a shiny new plaque on his base: "Big Prize to Whoever Chunks the Biggest Rock and Knocks the Statue Down."

At Purdy's store he helped himself to a Dr. Pepper and Butterfinger bar, fixing it in Mr. Purdy's mind that Elroy paid him. It seemed like such a good idea he set it up for the whole year.

Clifford Stone was out mowing his front yard. He didn't speak. Clifford was the most popular boy in school. His father was rich, he had a real bicycle, and he certainly never paid Little Elroy any mind. Little Elroy smiled and passed on by. Clifford didn't know it, but he was going to be Elroy's best friend for one whole year. Elroy was going to have a bicycle, and they'd go on long rides together every day.

A few houses down from Clifford's, Little Elroy stopped dead. Miss Sadie and her ugly old sister were working in their back yard. Elroy frowned and sucked the last of his Dr. Pepper. He'd forgotten all about Miss Sadie. Miss Sadie was the meanest teacher he'd ever had. He could still hear that prissy little mouth say, "You children ought to know you can't fool Miss Sadie. Miss Sadie's got eyes in the back of her head." Little Elroy's lips twitched. Then Elroy smiled wide. He walked on.

Before he reached the corner he heard a chilling scream. Seconds later Miss Sadie's ugly sister went charging by. She was screaming and flapping her apron, her eyes bugged out like she'd just seen something awful. Elroy watched her staggering in circles in the street like a chicken with its head off, and everyone who wasn't out looking

at the schoolhouse came to look at Miss Sadie's ugly sister.

Elroy squinted at the sun. After noon. The tickle started in his stomach. Time to get on home.

He felt pleased as he left town. The big boys and one old farmer were chunking rocks at the Reb soldier in the square, and there was still a good crowd in the schoolyard.

At the Widow Turner's he stopped for a minute in the shade of her elms before hitting the road. The widow's yard bloomed. She was a nice lady, always stopping Elroy to give him flowers for his Ma. Elroy decided that the widow's flowers would bloom all year this year; people would come from miles around to see the widow's pretty peonies in the snow.

Now the heat was fierce; dust jumped up and clung to his overalls at each step. But the closer he got to home, the faster Elroy walked. When he reached old man Willey's stubble field, the old man was out on the roadside working on his fence. His little pig eyes glared at Elroy.

"You'd better not try to cross my field, boy. I told you enough. I'll take a board to you, and if that don't work I'll load your behind with birdshot."

"It don't hurt your field none for me just to cross it," Elroy said in a reasonable tone.

"It's my property and you stay off!" the old man shouted. "White trash! Now, you go on. Git!"

Little Elroy shrugged and padded

on. Behind him he heard the first faint snick of fire in the dried brown stalks. Old man Willey let loose a wild fearful bawl.

The family was still lined up on the front porch when he came through the gate. His mother, holding the baby, wore a vacant smile, but his father's and brother's faces were pale.

"What's afire, boy?" his father asked in a shaky voice.

"Old man Willey's stub field."

"The one he don't let you cut across?"

"That's the one." Elroy sprawled on the step. "Ma, we got any lemonade? Sure is hot out on the road."

His mother made what almost seemed to be a curtsey and backed into the house. Elroy's father hunkered down beside him, looking sideways into his face.

His big brother, backed tight against the wall, cleared his throat. "Is the schoolhouse fell down, Elroy?" he asked respectfully. When Elroy nodded, he wheeled and stumbled up the stairs inside.

Elroy and his father watched the smoke rise from old man Willey's field. His father wiped sweaty hands on his overalls.

"What you been doin' in town, boy?"

"Oh, you know. Things." Elroy sighed.

"You know that field will burn for a whole year?" his father said, awed.

Elroy nodded solemnly. "He'll have

to watch it so's it don't spread."

"Elro — "

"Pa, you reckon trees got a brain?"

His father gaped. "Got a — what? Trees?"

"A brain. Can they think, you suppose?"

"Well, shoot no! They're just plants. Plants cant—"

"Then if a tree had a birthday, it wouldn't know it? Couldn't do anything, I mean?" His father stared blankly. Elroy spoke to him, man to man. "See, I don't want a money tree like you, Pa. That was dumb. I been practicing thinking big, and I got it all worked out. You know, this old dirt farm's hotter'n hell. What we need is a big shade tree in the yard." He patted his father's arm. "You got a nice strong frame, and I sure don't want no interfering when your birthday comes around."

His father lurched to his feet. His face quivered. "Elroy! Son! Stop — you don't want — "

"Yeah, I do, Pa. I want a big cool shade tree right over — there!" He pointed with a flourish.

Instantly a giant oak sank roots deep into the spot. For several seconds it uttered a high keening sound as its limbs threshed violently and the ground shook, then it shuddered all over and was still. Little Elroy hugged his knees and fixed a hammock in its deepest shade.

"Here's your lemonade, Elroy," his mother said behind him. "My good-

ness, where'd that tree come from?" Her smile flickered off and on. "Where's your Pa?"

"Pretty, ain't it?" Elroy said. Her head twitched and she made a strange sound. Her eyes were glassy.

"Ma, remember before baby sister come how you and me used to talk sometimes? The others never paid me any mind, but you did. You don't do that anymore."

His mother stared at the tree. "You always was a thinker," she said, and giggled.

"Why you spend so much time with her? She don't do nothing but spit and bubble." He eyed her slyly. "She could just as well be a pudding on the stove."

His mother's eyes rolled. "Pudding on the stove!" she repeated in a loud shrill voice.

"Here, why don't you go sit in the nice shade and finish up this lemonade? Cool off a bit. I'm just going upstairs to brother." He folded her limp fingers around the cup and went inside. The tickle in his stomach had spread all over.

When he opened the door to their room, his brother reared back from the window and spread himself against the wall. Little Elroy waited in the doorway, smiling.

"Elroy!" his brother roared. "That sure is a nice big tree out there. Where'd that tree come from? Where's Pa, Elroy?" His face was white and greasy with sweat; his legs shook.

"Oh, he's around," Little Elroy said.

"Elroy, I been thinking," his brother said in a squeaky voice. "What you said this morning about the Way couldn't be a bad thing and all? That was real smart — I do believe you're right. Yessir, I seen things in a new light and you, I seen you in a new light, too. I just ain't as smart as you, see? I sure do repent how I treated you in the past, not standing up for you and all, and it's gonna be different from now on. You and me, we're gonna be like two peas in a pod, and I ain't never going to laugh at you again."

Elroy just went on smiling.

"Elroy?" his brother panted. "Look at this, Elroy!" He fell to his knees and dug frantically under the bed. "I been hiding all these Zippy Story magazines from Ma and Pa. They's some real good ones here — naked ladies and all. You want 'em? You can have 'em, Elroy, every one."

They fell from his arms and scattered across the floor; he went scrabbling after them on his hands and knees. "You'll like 'em, Elroy, they're juicy. What else you want? Want to go fishing? I'll go fishing with you. A date with a girl? What, Elroy? Anything — you just name it. Oh, Little Elroy," he whimpered, wiping his nose on his sleeve, "please don't do anything bad to me. Don't do nothing bad!" He went face-down, blubbering into the floor.

Little Elroy sighed. "Naked ladies. Fishing. You sure ain't as smart as me,

big brother. You got hardly no imagination at all."

Downstairs in the kitchen his mother stood over the old wood stove, peering in at something in a pot and wringing her hands in her apron.

"Elroy?" she tittered. "I think you did something bad to —" She turned around and screamed. "Oh, dear Lord, what's that?"

"I got me a pet, Ma," Elroy said. Ain't he nice? He's the meanest, ugliest pet ever was, and he'll watch out for me every minute. He ain't got no brain, just does what I tell him. There ain't another like him." He paused proudly. "I call him Spot."

His mother looked at the thick wet trail of slime on the floor behind them and screamed again.

"Come on, Spot, we'll go sit on the front porch a while." Spot oozed with him out the door. After a while Elroy blanked out his mother's brain and she stopped screaming.

Just before sundown he had his mother bring out the chocolate birthday cake with blackberries, and they ate it in the cool shade of the big new tree.

Elroy sighed. He watched his mother rocking peacefully, hands folded in her lap. Baby sister burbled gently on the stove. The shiny new bicycle leaned against the porch, waiting, and at his feet Spot sloshed and slobbered over the piece of cake thrown down to him. From under Pa's quiet leaves, Elroy could see flames standing high

over old man Willey's field.

He drew a deep, contented breath. He'd saved the best for last. He thought a minute, then said it out loud, slow and careful, so it'd be sure to come out right.

"The last thing I'm going to do with the Way is fix it so that I can keep on having anything I want to happen, happen — every day all year. There."

He leaned back, satisfied, just as the sun brushed the top of distant trees. He was getting pretty good at

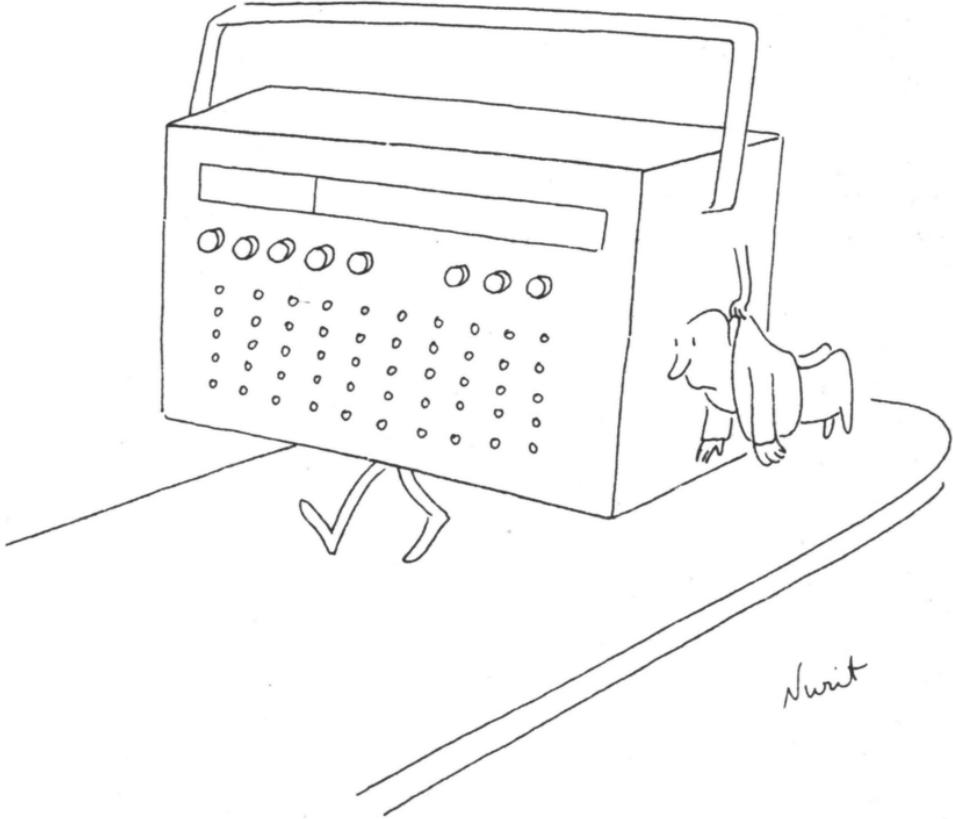
thinking big. And he'd get better.

His mother smiled across at him. "Pretty, pretty," she said sweetly.

Elroy mashed his cake and berries all together, the way he liked them. Of course, it could only last a year, but by then he'd have decided what to change them into next. A year was a long, long way away.

He stuffed his mouth full — then, loud and messy, began to sing.

"Happy birthday, Little Elroy. Happy birthday to you."



John Kessel has written several humorous pieces for F&SF, most recently "Not Responsible! Park and Lock It!" (September 1981). Here is something quite different and remarkable, the gripping story of Patrick Fallon, a young Chicago broker who finds himself deposited into a hammock on a nineteenth-century sailing ship.

Another Orphan

BY

JOHN KESSEL

"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

—Job

He woke to darkness and swaying and the stink of many bodies. He tried to lift his head and reach across the bed and found he was not in his bed at all. He was in a canvas hammock that rocked back and forth in a room of other hammocks.

"Carol?" Still half-asleep, he looked around, then lay back, hoping that he might wake and find this just a dream. He felt the distance from himself he often felt in dreams. But the room did not go away, and the smell of sweat and salt water and some overwhelming stink of oil became more real. The light slanting down through a latticed grating above became brighter;

he heard the sound of water and the creak of canvas, and the swaying did not stop, and the men about him began to stir. It came to him, in that same dream-like calm, that he was on a ship.

A bell sounded twice, then twice again. Most of the other men were up, grumbling, and stowing away the hammocks.

"What ails you, Fallon?" someone called. "Up, now."

two

His name was Patrick Fallon. He was 32 years old, a broker for a commission house at the Chicago Board of Trade. He played squash at an athletic club every Tuesday and Thursday night. He lived with a woman named Carol Bukaty.

The night before, he and Carol had

gone-to a party thrown by one of the other brokers and his wife. As sometimes happened with these parties, this one had degenerated into an exchange of sexual innuendo, none of it apparently serious, but with undertones of suspicions and the desire to hurt. Fallon had had too much wine and had said a few things to the hostess and about Carol that he had immediately wanted to retract. They'd driven back from the party in silence, but the minute they'd closed the door it had been a fight. Neither of them shouted, but his quiet statement that he did not respect her at all and hers that she was sickened by his excess, managed quite well. They had become adept in three years at getting at each other. They had, in the end, made up, and had made love.

As Fallon had lain there on the edge of sleep, he had had the idle thought that what had happened that evening was silly, but not funny. That something was wrong.

Fallon had the headache that was the residue of the wine; he could still smell Carol. He was very hungry and dazed as he stumbled into the bright sunlight on the deck of the ship. It was there. It was real. He was awake. The ocean stretched flat and empty in all directions. The ship rolled slightly as it made way with the help of a light wind, and despite the early morning it was already hot. He did not hear the sound or feel the vibration of an engine. Fallon stared, unable to collect

the scattered impressions into coherence; they were all consistent with the picture of an antiquated sailing ship on a very real ocean, all insane when compared with where his mind told him he ought to be.

The men had gone to their work as soon as they'd stretched into the morning light. They wore drab shirts and canvas trousers; most were barefoot. Fallon walked unsteadily along the deck, trying to keep out of their way as they set to scrubbing the deck. The ship was unlike anything he had ever seen on Lake Michigan; he tried to ignore the salt smell that threatened to make it impossible for him to convince himself this was Lake Michigan. Yet it seemed absurd for such a small vessel to be in the middle of an ocean. He knew that the Coast Guard kept sailing ships for training its cadets, but these were no cadets.

The deck was worn, scarred and greasy with a kind of oily, clear lard-like grease. The rail around the deck was varnished black and weather-beaten, but the pins set through it to which the rigging was secured were ivory. Fallon touched one — it was some kind of tooth. More ivory was used for rigging-blocks and on the capstan around which the anchor chain was wound. The ship was a thing of black wood fading to white under the assault of water and sun, and of white ivory corroding to black under the effect of dirt and hard use. Three long boats, pointed at both ends, hung from

arms of wood and metal on the left — the port — side; another such boat was slung at the rear of the deck on the starboard side, and on the raised part of the deck behind the mainmast two other boats were turned turtle and secured. Add to this the large hatch on the main deck and a massive brick structure that looked like some old-fashioned oven just behind the front mast, and there hardly seemed room for the fifteen or twenty men on deck to go about their business. There was certainly no place to hide.

"Fallon! Set your elbows to that deck or I shall have to set your nose to it!" A short, sandy-haired man accosted him. Stocky and muscular, he was some authority; there was insolence in his grin, and some seriousness. The other men looked up.

Fallon got out of the man's way. He went over to one of the groups washing down the deck with salt water, large scrub brushes, and what looked like push brooms with leather flaps instead of bristles, like large versions of the squeegees used to clean windows. The sandy-haired man watched him as he got down on his hands and knees and grabbed one of the brushes.

"There's a good lad, now. Ain't he, fellows?"

A couple of them laughed. Fallon started scrubbing, concentrating on the grain of the wood, at first fastidious about not wetting the already damp trousers he had apparently slept in, soon realizing that that was a lost

cause. The warm water was sloshed over them, the men leaned on the brushes, and the oil slowly flaked up and away through the spaces in the rail into the sea. The sun rose and it became even hotter. Now and then one of the men tried to say a word or two to him, but he did not answer.

"Fallon here's got the hypos," someone said.

"Or the cholera," another said. "He does look a bit bleary about the eye. Are you thirsty, Fallon? D' your legs ache? Are your bowels knotted?"

"My bowels are fine," he said.

That brought a good laugh. "Fine, he says! Manxman!" The sailor called to a decrepit old man leaning on his squeegee. "Tell the King-Post that Fallon's bowels are fine, now! The scrubbing does seem to have eased them."

"Don't ease them here, man!" the old man said seriously. The men roared again, and the next bucket of water was sloshed up between Fallon's legs.

three

In the movies men had faced similar situations. The amnesiac soldier came to on a farm in Wales. But invariably the soldier would give evidence of his confusion, challenging the farm owner, pestering his fellow workers with questions about where he was and how he got there, telling them of his persistent memory of a woman in

white with golden hair. Strangely — strangely even to Fallon — he did not feel that way. Confusion, yes, dread, curiosity — but no desire to call attention to himself, to try to make the obvious reality of his situation give way to the apparent reality of his memories. He did not think this was because of any strength of character or remarkable powers of adaptation. In fact, everything he did that first day revealed his ignorance of what he was supposed to know and do on the ship. He did not feel any great presence of mind; for minutes at a time he would stop working, stunned with awe and fear at the simple alienness of what was happening. If it was a dream, it was a vivid dream. If anything was a dream, it was Carol and the Chicago Board of Trade.

The soldier in the movie always managed, despite the impediments of his amnesia and the ignorance of those around him, to find the rational answer to his mystery. There always was a rational answer. That shell fragment which had grazed his forehead in Normandy had sent him back to a Wessex sanitorium, from which he had wandered during an air raid, to be picked up by a local handyman driving his lorry to Llanelly, who in the course of the journey decided to turn a few quid by leasing the poor soldier to a farmer as his half-wit cousin laborer. So it had to be that some physicist at the University of Chicago, working on the modern equivalent of the Manhat-

tan Project, had accidentally created a field of gravitational energy so intense that a vagrant vortex had broken free from it, and, in its lightning progress through the city on its way to extinction, had plucked Fallon from his bed in the suburbs, sucked him through a puncture in the fabric of space and time, to deposit him in a hammock on a mid-nineteenth-century sailing ship. Of course.

Fallon made a fool of himself ten times over during the day. Despite his small experience with fresh-water sailing, he knew next to nothing about the work he was meant to do on this ship. Besides cleaning the deck and equipment, the men scrubbed a hard, black soot from the rigging and spars. Fallon would not go up into the rigging. He was afraid, and tried to find work enough on the deck. He did not ask where the oil and soot had come from; it was obvious the source had been the brick furnace that was now topped by a tight-fitting wooden cover. Some of the cracks in the deck were filled with what looked like dried blood, but it was only the casual remark of one of the other men that caused him to realize, shocked at his own slowness, that this was a whaling ship.

The crew was an odd mixture of types and races: there were white and black, a group of six Orientals who sat apart on the rear deck and took no part in the work, men with British and German accents, and an eclectic collection of others — Polynesians, an Indian, a

huge, shaven-headed black African, and a mostly naked man covered from head to toe with purple tattoos, whorls and swirls and vortexes, images and symbols, none of them quite decipherable as a familiar object or person. After the decks had been scrubbed to a remarkable whiteness, the mate named Flask set Fallon to tarring some heavy ropes in the fore part of the ship, by himself, where he would be out of the others' way. The men seemed to realize that something was wrong with him, but said nothing and apparently did not take it amiss that one of their number should begin acting strangely.

Which brought him, hands and wrists smeared with warm tar, to the next question: how did they know who he was? He was Fallon to all of them. He had obviously been there before he awakened; he had been a regular member of the crew with a personality and role to fill. He knew nothing of that. He had the overwhelming desire to get hold of a mirror to see whether the face he wore was indeed the face he had worn in Chicago the night before. The body was the same, down to the appendix scar he'd carried since he was nine years old. His arms and hands were the same; the fatigue he felt and the rawness of his skin told him he had not been doing this type of work long. So assume he was there in his own person, his Chicago person, the *real* Fallon. Was there now some confused nineteenth-century sailor wandering around a brokerage house on Van

Buren? The thought made him smile. The sailor at the Board of Trade would probably get the worst of it.

So they knew who he was, even if he didn't remember ever having been here before. There was a Patrick Fallon on the ship, and *he* had somehow been brought here to fill that role. Reasons unknown. Method unknown. Way out....

Think of it as an adventure. How many times as a boy had he dreamed of similar escapes from the mundane? Here he was, the answer to a dream, twenty-five years later. It would make a tremendous story when he got back, if he could find someone he could trust enough to tell it to — if he could get back.

There was a possibility that he tried to keep himself from dwelling on. He had come here while asleep, and though this reality gave no evidence of being a dream, if there was a symmetry to insanity, then on waking the next morning, might he not be back in his familiar bed? Logic presented the possibility. He tried not to put too much faith in logic. Logic had not helped him when he was on the wrong side of the soybeans market in December, 1980.

The long tropic day declined; the sunset was a travel agent's dream. They were traveling east, by the signpost of that light. Fallon waited, sitting by a coil of rope, watching the helmsman at the far end of the ship lean, dozing, on the long ivory tiller that served this ship in place of the

wheel with handspikes he was familiar with from Errol Flynn movies. It had to be a bone from some long-dispatched whale, another example of the savage Yankee practicality of whoever had made this whaler. It was a queerly innocent, gruesome artistry. Fallon had watched several idle sailors in the afternoon carving pieces of bone while they ate their scrap of salt pork and hard bread.

"Fallon, you can't sleep out here tonight, unless you want the Old Man to find you lying about." It was a tall sailor of about Fallon's age. He had come down from aloft shortly after Fallon's assignment to the tar bucket, had watched him quietly for some minutes before giving him a few pointers on how the work was done. In the falling darkness, Fallon could not make out his expression, but the voice held a quiet distance that might mask just a trace of kindness. Fallon tried to get up and found his legs had grown so stiff he failed on the first try. The sailor caught his arm and helped him to his feet. "You're all right?"

"Yes." Fallon was embarrassed.

"Let's get below, then," They stepped toward the latticed hatch near the bow.

"And there he is," the sailor said, pausing, lifting his chin aft.

"Who?" Fallon looked back with him and saw the black figure there, heavily bearded, tall, in a long coat, steadying himself by a hand in the rigging. The oil lamp above the compass

slightly illuminated the dark face — and gleamed deathly white along with the ivory leg that projected from beneath his black coat. Fixed, immovable, the man leaned heavily on it.

"Ahab," the sailor said.

four

Lying in the hammock, trying to sleep, Fallon was assaulted by the feverish reality of where he was. The ship rocked him like a gentle parent in its progress through the calm sea; he heard the rush of water breaking against the hull as the *Pequod* made headway, the sighing of the breeze above, heard the steps of the night-watch on deck, the occasional snap of canvas, the creaking of braces; he sweated in the oppressive heat below-decks; he drew heavy breaths, trying to calm himself, of air laden with the smell of mildewed canvas and what he knew to be whale oil. He held his hands before his face and in the profound darkness knew them to be his own. He touched his neck and felt the slickness of sweat beneath the beard. He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted salt. Through the open hatch he could make out stars that were unchallenged by any other light. Would the stars be the same in a book as they were in reality?

In a book. Any chance he had to sleep flew from him whenever he ran up against that thought. Any logic he brought to bear on his situation crum-

bled under the weight of that absurdity. A time machine he could accept, some chance cosmic displacement that sucked him into the past. But not into a book. That was insanity; that was hallucination. He knew that if he could sleep now, he would wake once more in the real world. But he had nothing to grab hold of. He lay in the darkness listening to the ship and could not sleep at all.

They had been compelled to read *Moby Dick* in the junior-year American Renaissance class he'd taken to fulfill the last of his Humanities requirements. Fallon remembered being bored to tears by most of Melville's book, struggling with his interminable sentences, his wooly speculations that had no bearing on the story; he remembered being caught up by parts of that story. He had seen the movie with Gregory Peck. Richard Basehart, king of the sci-fi flicks, had played Ishmael. Fallon had not seen anyone who looked like Richard Basehart on this ship. The mate, Flask — he remembered that name now. He remembered that all the harpooners were savages. Queequeg.

He remembered that in the end, everyone but Ishmael died.

He had to get back. Sleep, sleep, you idiot, he told himself. He could not keep from laughing; it welled up in his chest and burst through his tightly closed lips. Fallon's laugh sounded more like a man gasping for breath than one overwhelmed by humor: he barked, he chuckled, he sucked in sud-

den draughts of air as he tried to control the spasms. Tears were in his eyes, and he twisted his head from side to side as if he were strapped to a bed in some ward. Some of the others stirred and cursed him, but Fallon, a character in a book where everyone died on the last page, shook with helpless laughter, crying, knowing he would not sleep.

five

With a preternatural clarity born of the sleepless night, Fallon saw the deck of the *Pequod* the next morning. He was a little stunned yet, but if he kept his mind in tight check the fatigue would keep him from thinking, and he would not feel the distress that was waiting to burst out again. Like a man carrying a balloon filled with acid, Fallon carried his knowledge tenderly.

He observed with scientific detachment, knowing that sleep would ultimately come, and with it perhaps escape. The day was bright and fair, a duplicate of the previous one. The whaler was clean and prepared for her work; all sails were set to take advantage of the light breeze, and the masts were manned with lookouts. Men loitered on deck. On the rear deck — the quarter-deck, they called it — Ahab paced, with remarkable steadiness for a man wearing an ivory leg, between the compass in its box and the mainmast, stopping for seconds to stare pointedly at each end of his path. Fallon could not take his eyes off the

man. He was much older than Fallon had imagined him from his memories of the book. Ahab's hair and beard were still black, except for the streak of white which ran through them as the old scar ran top to bottom across his face, but the face itself was deeply worn, and the man's eyes were sunken in wrinkles, hollow. Fallon remembered Tigue who had traded in the gold pit, who had once been the best boy on the floor — the burn-out, they called him now, talking a very good game about shorting the market. Tigue's eyes had the same hollow expectation of disaster waiting inevitably for him — just him — that Ahab's held. Yet when Fallon had decided Ahab had to be the same empty nonentity, the man would pause at the end of his pathway and stare at the compass, or the gold coin that was nailed to the mast, and his figure would tighten in the grip of some stiffening passion, as if he were shot through with lightning. As if he were at the focal point of some cosmic lens that concentrated all the power of the sun on him, so that he might momentarily burst into spontaneous flame.

Ahab talked to himself, staring at the coin. His voice was conversational, and higher pitched than Fallon had imagined it would be. Fallon was not the only man who watched him in wonder and fear.

"There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here

— three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round globe is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self..."

All spoken in the tone of a man describing a minor auto accident (the brown Buick swerved to avoid the boy on the bicycle, crossed over the yellow line and hit the milk truck which was going south on Main Street). As soon as he had stopped, Ahab turned and, instead of continuing his pacing, went quietly below.

One of the ship's officers — the first mate, Fallon thought — who had been talking to the helmsman before Ahab began to speak, now advanced to look at the coin. Fallon began to remember what was going to happen. Theatrically, though there was nobody there to listen to him, the mate began to speak aloud about the Trinity and the sun, hope and despair. Next came another mate, who talked of spending it quickly, then gave a reading comparing the signs of the zodiac to a man's life. Overwritten and silly, Fallon thought.

Flask now came to the doubloon and figured out how many cigars he could buy with it. Then came the old man who had sloshed the water all over Fallon the previous morning, who gave a reading of the ship's doom un-

der the sign of the lion. Then Queequeg, then one of the Orientals, then a black boy — the cabin boy.

The boy danced around the mast twice, crouching low, rising on his toes, and each time around stared at the doubloon with comically bugged eyes. He stopped. "I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look."

I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

They all looked at it; they all spouted their interpretations. That was what Melville had wanted them to do to prove his point. Fallon did not feel like trying to figure out what that point was. After the dramatics, the *Pequod* went back to dull routine, and he to cleanup work on the deck, to tarring more ropes. They had a lot of ropes.

He took a break and walked up to the mast to look at the coin himself. Its surface was stamped with the image of three mountains, with a flame, a tower, and a rooster at their peaks. Above were the sun and the signs of the zodiac. REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO, it said. A couple of ounces, worth maybe \$1,300 on the current gold market, according to the London fix Fallon last remembered. It wouldn't be worth as much to these men, of course; this was pre-inflation money. He remembered that the doubloon had been nailed there by Ahab as a reward to whoever spotted Moby Dick first.

I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

Fallon looked, and nothing chang-

ed. His tiredness grew as the day wore through a brutally hot afternoon. When evening at last came and the grumbling of his belly had been at least partially assuaged by the meager meal served the men, Fallon fell exhausted into the hammock. He did not worry about not sleeping this time; consciousness fell away as if he had been drugged. He had a vivid dream. He was trying, under cover of darkness, to pry the doubloon away from the mast so that he might throw it into the sea. Anxiously trying not to let the helmsman at the tiller spot him, he heard the step, tap, step, tap of Ahab's pacing a deck below. It was one of those dreams where one struggles in unfocused terror to accomplish some simple task. He was afraid he might be found any second by Ahab. If he were caught, then he would be exposed and vilified before the crew's indifferent gaze.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't get his fingers under the edge of the coin, though he bruised them bloody. He heard the knocking of Ahab's whalebone step ascending to the deck; the world contracted to the coin welded to the mast, his broken nails, the terrible fear. He heard the footsteps drawing nearer behind him as he frantically tried to free the doubloon, yet he could not run, and he would not turn around. At the last, after an eternity of anxiety, a hand fell on his shoulder and spun him around, his heart leaping into his throat. It was not Ahab, but Carol.

He woke breathing hard, pulse pounding. He was still in the hammock, in the forecastle of the *Pequod*. He closed his eyes again, dozed fretfully through the rest of the night. Morning came: he was still there.

The next day several of the other men prodded him about not having taken a turn at the masthead for a long time. He stuck to mumbled answers and hoped they would not go to any of the officers. He wanted to disappear. He wanted it to be over. The men treated him more scornfully as the days passed. And the days passed, and still nothing happened to free him. The doubloon glinted in the sun each morning, the center of the ship, and Fallon could not get away. I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.

six

Fallon had assumed his sullen station by the tar bucket. There he felt at least some defense from his confusion. He could concentrate on the smell and feel of the tar; he remembered the summers on the tarred road in front of his grandparents' house in Elmira, how the sun would raise shining bubbles of tar at the edges of the re-surfaced country road, how the tar would stick to your sneakers and get you a licking if you tracked it into grandmother's immaculate kitchen. He and his cousin Seth had broken the bubbles with sticks and watched them slowly subside into themselves. The tar bucket on

the *Pequod* was something Fallon could focus on. The tar was real; the air he breathed was real — Fallon himself was real.

Stubb, the second mate, stood in front of him, arms akimbo. He stared at Fallon; Fallon lifted his head and saw the man's small smile. There was no charity in it.

"Time to go aloft, Fallon. You've been missing your turn, and we won't have any slackers aboard."

Fallon couldn't think of anything to say. He stumbled to his feet, wiping his hands on a piece of burlap. A couple of the other sailors were watching, waiting for Fallon to shy off or for Stubb to take him.

"Up with ye!" Stubb shoved Fallon's shoulder, and he turned, fumbling for the rigging. Fallon looked momentarily over the side of the ship to the sea that slid calmly by them; the gentle rolling of the deck that he had in so short a time become accustomed to now returned to him with frightening force. Stubb was still behind him. Taking a good breath, he pulled himself up and stepped barefoot onto the rail. Facing inward now, he tried to climb the rigging. Stubb watched him with dispassion, waiting, it seemed, for his failure. Expecting it. It was like trying to climb one of those rope ladders at the county fair: each rung he took twisted the ladder in the direction of his weight, and the rocking of the ship, magnified as he went higher, made it hard for his feet to find the next step.

He had never been a particularly self-conscious man, but felt he was being watched by them all now, and was acutely conscious of how strange he must seem. How touched with idiocy and fear.

Nausea rose, the deck seemed farther below than it had any reason to be, the air was stifling, the wind was without freshness and did not cool the sweat from his brow and neck. He clutched the ropes desperately; he tried to take another step, but the strength seemed drained from his legs. Humiliated, burning with shame yet at the same time mortally afraid of falling — and of more than that, of the whole thing, of the fact that here he was where he ought not to be, cheated, abused, mystified — he wrapped his arms around the rigging, knees wobbly, sickness in his gut, bile threatening to heave itself up the back of his throat. Crying, eyes clenched tight, he wished it would all go away.

"Fallon! Fallon, ye dog, ye dog-fish, why don't ye climb! You had better climb, weak-liver, for I don't want you down on my deck again if ye won't!" Stubb roared his rage. Fallon opened his eyes, saw the red-faced man staring furiously up at him. Perhaps he'll have a stroke, Fallon thought.

He hung there, half-up, half-down, unable to move. I want to go home, he thought. Let me go home. Stubb raged and ridiculed him; others gathered to laugh and watch. Fallon closed his eyes and tried to go away. He heard a

sound like the wooden mallet of the carpenter.

"What is the problem here, Mr. Stubb?" A calm voice. Fallon looked down again. Ahab stood with his hand on the mainmast to steady himself, looking up. His thumb was touching the doubloon.

Stubb was taken by surprise, as if Ahab were some apparition that had been called up by an entirely inappropriate spell. He jerked his head upward to indicate Fallon.

Squinting against the sun, Ahab studied Fallon for some time. His face was unnaturally pale in comparison to the tanned faces of the others turned up to look at him. Yet against the pallor, the white scar ran, a death-like sign, down the side of his face. His dark hair was disarrayed in the hot breeze. He was an old man; he swayed in the attempt to steady himself.

"Why don't ye go up?" Ahab called to Fallon.

Fallon shook his head. He tried to step up another rung, but though his foot found the rope, he didn't seem to have the strength he needed to pull himself up.

Ahab continued to look at him. He did not seem impatient or angry, only curious, as if Fallon were an animal sitting frozen on a traffic mall, afraid of the cars that passed. He seemed content to stand watching Fallon indefinitely. Stubb shifted nervously from foot to foot, his anger displaced and negated. The crewmen simply watch-

ed. Some of them looked above Fallon in the rigging; the ropes he clung to jerked, and he looked up himself to see that the man who had been standing at the masthead was coming down to help him.

"Bulkington!" Ahab cried, waving to the man to stop. "Let him be!" The sailor retreated upward and swung himself onto the yardarm above the mainsail. The *Pequod* waited. If there were whales to be hunted, they waited too.

Very distinctly, so that Fallon heard every word, Ahab said, "You must go up. Ye have taken the vow with the rest, and I will not have you go back on it. Would you go back on it? You must go up, or else you must come down, and show yourself for the coward and weakling you would then be."

Fallon clung to the rigging. He had taken no vow. It was all a story. What difference did it make what he did in a story? If he was to be a character in a book, why couldn't he defy it, do what he wanted instead of following the path they indicated? By coming down he could show himself as himself.

"Have faith!" Ahab called.

Above him, Bulkington hawked and spat, timing it so that with the wind and the rocking of the *Pequod*, he hit the sea and not the deck. Fallon bent his head back and looked up at him. It was the kind sailor who had helped him below on that first night. He hung suspended. He looked down

and watched Ahab sway with the rolling of the deck, his eyes still fixed on Fallon. The man was crazy. Melville was crazy for inventing him.

Fallon clenched his teeth, pulled on the ropes and pushed himself up another step toward the masthead. He was midway up the mainsail, thirty feet above the deck. He concentrated on one rung at a time, breathing steadily, and pulled himself up. When he reached the level of the mainyard, Bulkington swung himself below Fallon and helped him along. The complicated motion that came when the sailor stepped onto the ropes had Fallon clinging once again, but this time he was out of it fairly quickly. They ascended, step by dizzying step, to the masthead. The sailor got onto the crosspiece and pulled himself into the port masthead hoop, helping Fallon into the starboard. The *Pequod's* flag snapped in the wind a couple of feet above their heads.

"And here we are, Fallon," Bulkington said. Immediately he dropped himself down into the rigging again, so nimbly and suddenly that Fallon's breath was stopped in fear for the man's fall.

Way below, the men were once more stirring. Ahab exchanged some words with Stubb; then, moving out to the rail and steadyng himself by a hand on one of the stays, a foreshortened black puppet far below, he turned his white face up to Fallon once again. Cupping his hand to his mouth, he

shouted, "Keep a steady eye, now! If ye see fin or flank of him, call away!"

Call away. Fallon was far above it all now, alone. He had made it. He had taken no vow and was not obligated to do anything he did not wish to. He had ascended to the masthead of his own free will, but, if he was to become a whaler, then what harm would there be in calling out whales — normal whales? Not literary ones. Not white ones.

He looked out to the horizon. The sea stretched out to the utmost ends of the world, covering it all, every secret, clear and blue and a little choppy under the innocent sky.

seven

Fallon became used to the smell of the *Pequod*. He became accustomed to feeling sweaty and dirty, to the musty smell of mildew and the tang of brine trying to push away the stench of the packing plant.

He had not always been fastidious in his other life. In the late sixties, after he had dropped out of Northwestern, he had lived in an old house in a rundown neighborhood with three other men and a woman. They had called it "The Big House," and to the outside observer they must have been hippies. "Hair men." "Freaks." "Dropouts." It was a vocabulary that seemed quaint now. The perpetual pile of dirty dishes in the sink, the Fillmore West posters, the black light, the hot and cold run-

ning roaches, the early-fifties furniture with corners shredded to tatters by the three cats. Fallon realized that that life had been as different from his world at the Board of Trade as the deck of the *Pequod* was now.

Fallon had dropped out because, he'd told himself, there was nothing he wanted from the university that he couldn't get from its library, or by hanging around the student union. It was hard for him to believe how much he had read then: Skinner's behaviorism, Spengler's history, pop physics and Thomas Kuhn, Friedman and Galbraith, Shaw, Conrad, Nabokov, and all he could find of Hammett, Chandler, Macdonald and their imitators. Later he had not been able to figure out just why he had forsaken a degree so easily; he didn't know if he was too irresponsible to do the work, or too slow, or above it all and following his own path. Certainly he had not seen himself as a rebel, and the revolutionary fervor his peers affected (it had seemed affectation ninety percent of the time) never took hold of Fallon completely. He had observed, but not taken part in, the melee at the Democratic Convention. But he put in his time in the back bedroom listening to the Doors and blowing dope until the world seemed no more than a slightly bigger version of the Big House and his circle of friends. He read *The Way of Zen*. He knew Hesse and Kerouac. He hated Richard Nixon and laughed at Spiro Agnew. Aloft in the rigging of

the *Pequod*, those years came back to Fallon as they never had in his last five years at the CBT. What a different person he had been at twenty. What a strange person, he realized, he had become at twenty-eight. What a marvelous — and frightening — metamorphosis.

He had gotten sick of stagnating, he told himself. He had seen one or another of his friends smoke himself into passivity. He had seen through the self-delusions of the other cripples in the Big House: cripples was what he had called them when he'd had the argument with Marty Solokov and had stalked out. Because he broke from that way of living did not mean he was selling out, he'd told them. He could work any kind of job; he didn't want money or a house in the suburbs. He had wanted to give himself the feeling of getting started again, of moving, of putting meaning to each day. He had quit washing dishes for the university, moved into a dingy flat closer to the center of the city, and scanned the help-wanted columns. He still saw his friends often and got stoned maybe not quite as often, and listened to music and read. But he had had enough of "finding himself," and he recognized in the others how finding yourself became an excuse for doing nothing.

Marty's cousin was a runner for Pearson Joel Chones on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange who had occasionally come by the house, gotten high and gone to concerts. Fallon had

slept with her once. He called her up, and she asked around, and eventually he cut his hair short — not too short — and became a runner for Pearson, too. He became marginally better groomed. He took a shower and changed his underwear every day. He bought three ties and wore one of them on the trading floor because that was one of the rules of the exchange.

It occurred to Fallon to find Ishmael, if only to see the man who would live while he died. He listened and watched; he learned the name of every man on the ship — he knew Flask and Stubb and Starbuck and Bulkington, Tashtego, Dagoo and Queequeg, identified Fedallah, the lead Philippine boatsman. There was no Ishmael. At first Fallon was puzzled, then came the beginnings of hope. If the reality he was living in could be found to differ from the reality of Melville's book in such an important particular, then could it not differ in some other way — some way that would at least lead to his survival? Maybe this Ahab caught his white whale. Maybe Starbuck would steel himself to the point where he could defy the madman and take over the ship. Perhaps they would never sight Moby Dick.

Then an unsettling realization smothered the hope before it could come fully to bloom: there was not necessarily an Ishmael in the book. "*Call me Ishmael,*" it started. Ishmael was a pseudonym for some other man,

and there would be no one by that name on the *Pequod*. Fallon congratulated himself on a clever bit of literary detective work.

Yet the hope refused to remain dead. Yes, there was no Ishmael on the *Pequod*; or anyone on the ship not specifically named in the book might be Ishmael, any one of the anonymous sailors, within certain broad parameters of age and character — and Fallon wracked his brain trying to remember what the narrator said of himself — might be Ishmael. He grabbed at that; he breathed in the possibility and tried on the suit for size. Why not? If absurdity were to rule to the extent that he had to be there in the first place, then why couldn't he be the one who lived? More than that, why couldn't he make himself that man? No one else knew what Fallon knew. He had the advantage over them. Do the things that Ishmael did, and you may be him. If you have to be a character in a book, why not be the hero?

Fallon's first contact with the heart of capitalism at the CME had been frightening and amusing. Frightening when he screwed up and delivered a May buy-order to a July trader and cost the company 10,000 dollars. It was only through the grace of God and his own guts in facing it out that he had made it through the disaster. He had, he discovered, the ability to hide himself behind a facade which, to the self-interested observer, would appear to

be whatever that observer wished it to be. If his superior expected him to be respectful and curious, then Fallon was respectfully curious. He did it without having to compromise his inner self. He was not a hypocrite.

The amusing part came after he had it all down and he began to watch the market like an observer at a very complex monopoly game. Or, more accurately, like a baseball fan during a pennant race. There were at least as many statistics as in a good baseball season, enough personalities, strategies, great plays, blunders, risk and luck. Fallon would walk onto the floor at the beginning of the day — the huge room with its concert-hall atmosphere, the banks of price boards around the walls, the twilight, the conditioned air, the hundreds of bright-coated traders and agents — and think of half time at homecoming. The floor at the end of the day, as he walked across the hardwood scattered with mounds of paper scraps like so much confetti, was a basketball court after the NCAA finals. Topping it all off, giving it that last significant twist that was necessary to all good jokes, was the fact that this was all supposed to mean something; it was real money they were playing with, and one tick of the board in Treasury Bills cost somebody eleven-hundred dollars. This was serious stuff, kid. The lifeblood of the nation — of the free world. Fallon could hardly hold in his laughter, could not stop his fascination.

Fallon's first contact with the whale — his first lowering — was in Stubb's boat. The man at the forward mast-head cried out, "There she blows! Three points off starboard! There she blows! Three — no, four of 'em!"

The men sprang to the longboats and swung them away over the side. Fallon did his best to look as if he was helping. Stubb's crew leapt into the boat as it was dropped into the swelling sea, heedless to the possibility of broken bones or sprained ankles. Fallon hesitated a second at the rail, then threw himself off with the feeling of a man leaping off the World Trade Center. He landed clumsily and half-bowled over one of the men. He took his place at a center oar and pulled away. Like the man falling off the building, counting off the stories as they flew past him, Fallon thought, "So far, so good." And waited for the crash.

"Stop snoring, ye sleepers, and pull!" Stubb called, halfway between jest and anger. "Pull, Fallon! Why don't you pull? Have you never seen an oar before? Don't look over your shoulder, lad, *pull!* That's better. Don't be in a hurry, men — softly, softly now — but damn ye, pull until you break something! Tashtego! Can't you harpoon me some men with backs to them? *Pull!*"

Fallon pulled until he thought the muscles in his arms would snap, until the small of his back spasmed as if he

were indeed being harpooned by the black-haired Indian behind him in the bow. The sea was rough, and they were soon soaked with spray. After a few minutes Fallon forgot the whales they pursued, merged into the rhythm of the work, fell in with the cunning flow of Stubb's curses and pleas, the crazy sermon, now whispered, now shouted. He concentrated on the oar in his hands, the bite of the blade into the water, the simple mechanism his body had become, the working of his lungs, the dry rawness of the breath dragged in and out in time to their rocking, back-breaking work. Fallon closed his eyes, heard the pulse in his ears, felt the cool spray and the hot sun, saw the rose fog of the blood in his eyelids as he faced into the bright and brutal day.

At twenty-five, Fallon was offered a position in the office upstairs. At twenty-seven, he had an offer from DCB International to become a broker. By that time he was living with Carol. Why not? He was still outside it all, still safe within. Let them think what they would of him; he was protected, in the final analysis, by that great indifference he held to his breast the way he held Carol close at night. He was not a hypocrite. He said nothing he did not believe in. Let them project upon him whatever fantasies they might hold dear to themselves. He was outside and above it all, analyzing futures for DCB International. Clearly, in every contract that crossed his desk,

it was stated that DCB and its brokers were not responsible for reverses that might be suffered as a result of suggestions they made.

So he had spent the next four years, apart from it, pursuing his interests, which, with the money he was making, he found were many. Fallon saw very little of the old friends now. Solokov's cousin told him he was now in New York, cadging money from strangers in Times Square. Solokov, she said, claimed it was a pretty good living. He claimed he was still beating the system. Fallon had grown up enough to realize that no one really beat any system — as if there were a system. There was only buying and selling, subject to the forces of the market and the infirmities of the players. Fallon was on the edges of it, could watch quietly, taking part as necessary (he had to eat), but still stay safe. He was no hypocrite.

"To the devil with ye, boys, will ye be outdone by Ahab's heathens? Pull, spring it, my children, my fine hearts-alive, smoothly, smoothly, bend it hard starboard! Aye, Fallon, let me see you sweat, lad, can you sweat for me?"

They rose on the swell, and it was like rowing uphill; they slid down the other side, still rowing, whooping like children on a toboggan ride, all the time Stubb calling on them. Fallon saw Starbuck's boat off to his right; he heard the rush of water beneath them, and the rush of something faster and greater than their boat.

Tashtego grunted behind him.

"A hit, a hit!" Stubb shouted, and beside Fallon the whaleline was running out with such speed that it sang and hummed and smoked. One of the men sloshed water over the place where it slid taut as a wire over the gunnel. Then the boat jerked forward so suddenly that Fallon was nearly knocked overboard when his oar, still trailing in the water, slammed into his chest. Gasping at the pain, he managed to get the oar up into the air. Stubb had half-risen from his seat in the stern.

They flew through the water. The whaleboat bucked as it slapped the surface of every swell the whale pulled them through. Fallon held on for dear life, not sure whether he ought to be grateful he hadn't been pitched out when the ride began. He tried to twist around to see the monster that was towing them, but able to turn only half way, all he could see for the spray and the violent motion was the swell and rush of white water ahead of them. Tashtego, crouched in the bow, grinned wickedly as he tossed out wooden blocks tied to the whaleline in order to tire the whale with their drag. You might as well try to tire a road grader.

Yet he could not help but feel exhilarated, and he saw that the others in the boat, hanging on or trying to draw the line in, were flushed and breathing as hard as he.

He turned again and saw the whale.

Fallon had been a very good swimmer in high school. He met Carol Bukaty at a swimming pool about a year after he had gone to work at the CME. Fallon first noticed her in the pool, swimming laps. She was the best swimmer there, better than he, though he might have been stronger than she in the short run. She gave herself over to the water and did not fight it; the kick of her long legs was steady and strong. She breathed easily and her strokes were relaxed, yet powerful. She did not swim for speed, but she looked as if she could swim for days, so comfortable did she seem in the water. Fallon sat on the steps at the pool's edge and watched her for half an hour without once getting bored. He found her grace in the water arousing. He knew he had to speak to her. He slid into the pool and swam laps behind her.

At last she stopped. Holding onto the trough at the end of the pool, she pushed her goggles up onto her forehead and brushed the wet brown hair away from her eyes. He drew up beside her.

"You swim very well," he said.

She was out of breath. "Thank you."

"You look as if you wouldn't ever need to come out of the water. Like anything else might be a comedown after swimming." It was a strange thing for him to say; it was not what he wanted to say, but he did not know what he wanted, besides her.

She looked puzzled, smiled briefly, and pulled herself onto the side of the pool, letting her legs dangle in the water. "Sometimes I feel that way," she said. "I'm Carol Bukaty." She stuck out her hand, very businesslike.

"Pat Fallon."

She wore a grey tank suit; she was slender and small-breasted, tall, with a pointed chin and brown eyes. Fallon later discovered that she was an excellent dancer, that she purchased women's clothing for one of the major Chicago department stores, that she traveled a great deal, wrote lousy poetry, disliked cooking, liked children, and liked him. At first he was merely interested in her sexually, though the first few times they slept together it was not very good at all. Gradually the sex got better, and in the meantime Fallon fell in love.

She would meet him at the athletic club after work; they would play racquet ball in the late afternoon, go out to dinner and take in a movie, then spend the night at his or her apartment. He met her alcoholic father, a retired policeman who told endless stories about ward politics and the Daley machine, and Carol spent a Christmas with him at his parents'. After they moved in together, they settled into a comfortable routine. He felt secure in her affection for him. He did not want her, after a while, as much as he had that first day, those first months, but he still needed her. It still mattered to him what she was doing

and what she thought of him. Sometimes it mattered to him too much, he thought. Sometimes he wanted to be without her at all, not because he had anything he could only do without her, but only because he wanted to *be* without her.

He would watch her getting dressed in the morning and wonder what creature she might be, and what that creature was doing in the same room with him. He would lie beside her as she slept, stroking the short brown hair at her temple with his fingertips, and be overwhelmed with the desire to possess her, to hold her head between his hands and know everything that she was; he would shake with the sudden frustration of its impossibility until it was all he could do to keep from striking her. Something was wrong with him, or with her. He had fantasies of how much she would miss him if he died, of what clothes she would wear to the funeral, of what stories she would tell her lovers in the future after he was gone.

If Carol felt any of the same things about him, she did not tell him. For Fallon's part, he did not try to explain what he felt in any but the most oblique ways. She should know how he felt, but of course she did not. So when things went badly, and they began to do so more and more, it was not possible for him to explain to her what was wrong, because he could not say it himself, and the pieces of his discontent were things that he was too em-

barrassed to admit. Yet he could not deny that sometimes he felt as if it was all over between them, that he felt nothing — and at others he would smile just to have her walk into the room.

Remarkable creature though the whale was, it was not so hard to kill one after all. It tired, just as a man would tire under the attack of a group of strangers. It slowed in the water, no longer able so effortlessly to drag them after it. They pulled close, and Stubb drove home the iron, jerked it back and forth, drew it out and drove it home again, fist over fist on the hilt, booted foot over the gunnel braced against the creature's flesh, sweating, searching for the whale's hidden life. At last he found it, and the whale shuddered and thrashed a last time, spouting pink mist, then dark blood, where once it spouted feathery white spray. Like a man, helpless in the end, it rolled over and died. Stubb was jolly, and the men were methodical; they tied their lines around the great tail and, as shadows grew long and the sun fell perpendicularly toward the horizon, drew the dead whale to the *Pequod*.

eight

During the cutting up and boiling down of the whale that night, Fallon, perhaps in recognition of his return to normality as indicated by his return to the masthead, was given a real job:

slicing the chunks of blubber that a couple of other sailors were hewing out of the great strips that were hauled over the side into "bible leaves." Fallon got the hang of it pretty quickly, though he was not fast, and Staley, the British sailor who was cutting beside him, kept poking at him to do more. "I'm doing all the work, Fallon," he said, as if his ambition in life were to make sure that he did no more than his own share of the work.

Using a sharp blade like a long cleaver, Fallon would position the chunk of blubber, skin side down on the cutting table, and imitating Staley, cut the piece into slices like the pages of a book, with the skin as its spine. The blubber leaves flopped outward or stuck to each other, and the table became slick with grease. Fallon was at first careful about avoiding his hands, but the blubber would slide around the table as he tried to cut it if he didn't hold it still. Staley pushed him on, working with dexterity, though Fallon noted that the man's hands were scarred, with the top joint of the middle finger of his left hand missing.

His back and shoulders ached with fatigue, and the smoke from the try-works stung his eyes. When he tried to wipe the tears away, he only smeared his face with grease. But he did a creditable job, cursing all the time. The cursing helped, and the other men seemed to accept him more for it. When finally they were done, and the deck was clean the next day, they were

issued a tot of grog and allowed to swim within the lee of the stationary ship. The men were more real to him than when he had sat and watched from the outcast's station of the tar bucket. He was able to speak to them more naturally than he had ever done. But he did not forget his predicament.

"Ye are too serious, Fallon," Staley told him, offering Fallon some of his grog. "I can see you brooding there, and look how it set you into a funk. Ye are better now, perhaps, but mind you stick to your work and ye may survive this voyage."

"I won't survive it. Neither will you — unless we can do something about Captain Ahab."

Bulkington, who had been watching them, came by. "What of Captain Ahab?"

Fallon saw a chance in this. "Does his seeking after this white whale seem right to you?"

"The whale took his leg," Staley said.

"Some say it unmanned him," the other said, lower. "That's two legs you'd not like to lose yourself, I'll dare-say."

Fallon drew them aside, more earnest now. "We will lose more than our balls if we do nothing about this situation. The man is out of his mind. He will drag us all down with him, and this ship with all of us, if we can't convince Starbuck to do something. Believe me, I know."

Friendly Bulkington did not look so

friendly. "You do talk strange, Fallon. We took an oath, and we signed the papers before we even sailed a cable from shore. A captain is a captain. You are talking mutiny."

He had to go carefully.

"No, wait. Listen to me. Why are we sent on this trip? Think of the — the stockholders, or whatever you call them. The owners. They sent us out to hunt whales."

"The white whale is a whale." Staley looked petulant.

"Yes, of course it's a whale. But there are hundreds of whales to be caught and killed. We don't need to hunt that one. Hasn't he set his sights on just Moby Dick? What about that oath? That gold piece on the mast? That says he's just out for vengeance. There was nothing about vengeance in the papers we signed. What do you think the owners would say if they knew about what he plans? Do you think they would approve of this wild goose chase?"

Staley was lost. "Goose chase?"

Bulkington was interested. "Go on."

Fallon had his foot in the door; he marshaled the arguments he had rehearsed over and over again. "There's no more oil in Moby Dick than in another whale...."

"They say he's monstrous big," Staley interjected.

Fallon looked pained. "Not so big as any two whales, then. Ahab is not after any oil you can boil out of the

whale's flesh. If the owners knew what he intended, the way I do, if they knew how sick he was the week before he came out of that hole of a cabin he lives in, if they saw that light in his eye and the charts he keeps in his cabinet...."

"Charts? What charts? Have you been in his cabin?"

"No, not exactly," Fallon said. "Look, I know some things, but that's just because I keep my eyes open and I have some sources."

"Fallon, where do you hail from? I swear that I cannot half the time make out what you are saying. Sources? What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, Jesus!" He had hoped for better from Bulkington.

Staley darkened. "Don't blaspheme, man! I'll not take the word of a blasphemer."

Fallon saw another opening. "You're right! I'm sorry. But look, didn't the old man himself blaspheme more seriously than I ever could the night of that oath? If you are a god-fearing man, Staley, you'll know that that is true. Would you give your obedience to such a man? Moby Dick is just another of God's creatures, a dumb animal. Is it right to seek vengeance on an animal? Do you want to be responsible for that? God would not approve."

Staley looked troubled, but stubborn. "Do not tell me what the Almighty approves. That is not for the likes of you to know. And Ahab is the

captain." With that he walked to the opposite side of the deck and stood there watching them as if he wanted to separate himself as much as possible from the conversation, yet still know what was going on.

Fallon was exasperated and tired.

"Why don't you go with Staley, Bulkington? You don't have to stick around with me, you know. I'm not going to do your reputation any good."

Bulkington eyed him steadily. "You are a strange one, Fallon. I did not think anything of you when I first saw you on the *Pequod*. But you may be talking some sense."

"Staley doesn't think so."

Bulkington took a pull on his grog. "Why did you try to persuade Staley of Ahab's madness? You should have known that you couldn't convince such a man that the sky is blue, if it were written in the articles he signed that it was green. Starbuck perhaps, or me. Not Staley. Don't you listen to the man you are talking to?"

Fallon looked at Bulkington; the tall sailor looked calmly back at him, patient, waiting.

"Okay, you're right," Fallon said. "I have the feeling I would not have a hard time convincing you, anyway. You know Ahab's insane, don't you?"

"It's not for me to say. Ahab has better reasons than those you give to him." He drew a deep breath, looked up at the sky, down at the men who swam in the shadow of the ship. He

smiled. "They should be more wary of sharks," he said.

"The world does look a garden today, Fallon. But it may be that the old man's eyes are better than ours."

"You know he's mad, and you won't do anything?"

"The matter will not bear too deep a looking into." Bulkington was silent for a moment. "You know the story about the man born with a silver screw in his navel? How it tasked him, until one day he unscrewed it to divine its purpose?"

Fallon had heard the joke in grade school on the South Side. "His ass fell off."

"You and Ahab are too much like that mart."

They both laughed. "I don't have to unscrew my navel," Fallon said. "We're all going to lose our asses anyway."

They laughed again. Bulkington put his arm around his shoulders, and they toasted Moby Dick.

nine

There came a morning when, on pumping out the bilge, someone noticed that considerable whale oil was coming up with the water. Starbuck was summoned and, after descending into the hold himself, emerged and went aft and below to speak with Ahab. Fallon asked one of the others what was going on.

"The casks are leaking. We're going

to have to lay up and break them out. If we don't, we stand to lose a lot of oil."

Some time later Starbuck reappeared. His face was red to the point of apoplexy, and he paced around the quarter-deck with his hands knotted behind his back. They waited for him to tell them what to do; he stared at the crewmen, stopped, and told them to be about their business. "Keep pumping," he told the others. "Maintain the lookout." He then spoke briefly to the helmsman leaning on the whalebone tiller, and retreated to the corner of the quarter-deck to watch the wake of the ship. After a while Ahab himself staggered up onto the deck, found Starbuck, and spoke to him. He then turned to the men on deck.

"Furl the t'gallantsails," he called, "and close reef the topsails, fore and aft; back the main-yard; up Burtons, and break out in the main hold."

Fallon joined the others around the hold. Once the work had commenced, he concentrated on lifting, hauling, and not straining his back. The Manxman told them that he had been outside Ahab's cabin during the conference and that Ahab had threatened to shoot Starbuck dead on the spot when the mate demanded they stop chasing the whale to break out the hold. Fallon thought about the anger in Starbuck's face when he'd come up again. It struck him that the Starbuck of Melville's book was pretty ineffectual; he had to be to let that madman go

on with the chase. But this Starbuck — whether like the one in the book or not — did not like the way things were going. There was no reason why Fallon had to sit around and wait for things to happen. It was worth a shot.

But not that afternoon.

Racism assured that the hardest work in the dark hold was done by the colored men — Dago, Tashtego, and Queequeg. They did not complain. Up to their knees in the bilge, clambering awkwardly over and about the barrels of oil in the murderous heat and unbreathable air of the hold, they did their jobs.

It was evening before the three harpooneers were told they could halt for the day and they emerged, sweaty, covered with slime, and bruised. Fallon collapsed against the side of the try-works; others sat beside him. Tall Queequeg was taken by a coughing fit, then went below to his hammock. Fallon gathered his strength, felt the sweat drying stickily on his arms and neck. There were few clouds, and the moon was waxing full. He saw Starbuck then, standing at the rear of the quarter-deck, face toward the mast. Was he looking at the doubloon?

Fallon got shakily to his feet; his legs were rubbery. The first mate did not notice him until he was close. He looked up.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Starbuck, I need to speak to you."

Starbuck looked at him as if he saw

him for the first time. Fallon tried to look self-confident, serious. He'd gotten that one down well at DCB.

"Yes?"

Fallon turned so that he was facing inward toward the deck and Starbuck had his back to it to face him. He could see what was happening away from them and would know if anyone came near.

"I could not help but see that you were angry this morning after speaking to Captain Ahab."

Starbuck looked puzzled.

"I assume that you must have told Ahab about the leaking oil, and he didn't want to stop his hunt of the whale long enough to break out the hold. Am I right?"

The mate watched him guardedly. "What passed between Captain Ahab and me was none of your affair, or of the crew's. Is that what you've come to trouble me with?"

"It is a matter that concerns me," Fallon said. "It concerns the rest of the crew, and it ought to concern you. We are being bound by his orders, and what kind of orders is he giving? I know what you've been thinking; I know that this personal vengeance he seeks frightens and repulses you. I know what you're thinking. I could see what was in your mind when you stood at this rail this afternoon. He is not going to stop until he kills us all."

Starbuck seemed to draw back within himself. Fallon saw how beaten the man's eyes were; he did not think

the mate was a drinker, but he looked like someone who had just surfaced after a long weekend. He could almost see the clockwork turning within Starbuck, a beat too slow, with the belligerence of the drunk being told the truth about himself that he did not want to admit. Fallon's last fight with Stein Jr. at the brokerage had started that way.

"Get back to your work," Starbuck said. He started to turn away.

Fallon put his hand on his shoulder. "You have to—"

Starbuck whirled with surprising violence and pushed Fallon away so that he nearly stumbled and fell. The man at the tiller was watching them.

"To work! You do not know what I am thinking! I'll have you flogged if you say anything more! A man with a three-hundred lay has nothing to tell me. Go on, now."

Fallon was hot. "God damn you. You stupid—"

"Enough!" Starbuck slapped him with the back of his hand, the way Stein had tried to slap Fallon. Stein had missed. It appeared that Mr. Starbuck was more effectual than Stein Jr. Fallon felt his bruised cheek. The thing that hurt the most was the way he must have looked, like a hangdog insubordinate who had been shown his place. As Fallon stumbled away, Starbuck said, in a steadier voice, "Tend to your own conscience, man. Let me tend to mine."

Lightning flashed again.

"I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and even for hat thou canst but kill, and all are killed!"

Ahab had sailed them into the heart of a typhoon. The sails were in tatters, and the men ran across the deck shouting against the wind and trying to lash the boats down tighter before they were washed away or smashed. Stubb had gotten his left hand caught between one of the boats and the rail; he now held it with his right and grimaced. The mastheads were touched with St. Elmo's fire. Ahab stood with the lightning rod in his right hand and his right foot planted on the neck of Fedallah, declaiming at the lightning. Fallon held tightly to a shroud to keep from being thrown off his feet. The scene was ludicrous; it was horrible.

"No fearless fool now fronts thee!" Ahab shouted at the storm. "I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me! In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here!"

Terrific, Fallon thought. Psychobabble. Melville writes in a storm so Ahab can have a backdrop against which to define himself. They must not have gone in for realism much in Mel-

ville's day. He turned and tried to lash the rear quarter boat tighter; its stern had already been smashed in by a wave that had just about swept three men, including Fallon, overboard. Lightning flashed, followed a split-second later by the rolling thunder. Fallon recalled that five-seconds' count meant the lightning was a mile away; by that measure the last bolt must have hit them in the ass. Most of the crew were staring open-mouthed at Ahab and the glowing, eerie flames that touched the masts. The light had the bluish tinge of mercury vapor lamps in a parking lot. It sucked the color out of things; the faces of the frightened men were the sickly hue of fish bellies.

"Thou canst blind, but I can then grope. Thou canst consume, but I can then be ashes!" You bet. "Take the homage of these poor eyes, and shutter-hands. I would not take it...." Ahab ranted on. Fallon hardly gave a damn anymore. The book was too much. Ahab talked to the storm and the God behind it; the storm answered him back, lighting flash for curse. It was dramatic, stagy; it was real: Melville's universe was created so that such dialogues could take place; the howling gale and the tons of water, the crashing waves, flapping canvas, the sweating, frightened men, the blood and seawater — all were created to have a particular effect, to be sure, but it was the real universe, and it would work that way because that was the way it was set up to work by a frustrat-

ed, mystified man chasing his own obsessions, creating the world as a warped mirror of his distorted vision.

"There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical...."

There is an ex-sailor on a farm in Massachusetts trying to make ends meet while his puzzled wife tries to explain him to the relatives.

"The boat! The boat!" cried Starbuck. "Look at thy boat, old man!"

Fallon looked, and backed away. A couple of feet from him the harpoon that was lashed into the bow was tipped with the same fire that illuminated the masts. Silently within the howling storm, from its barbed end twin streamers of electricity writhed. Fallon backed away to the rail, heart beating quickly, and clutched the slick whalebone.

Ahab staggered toward the boat; Starbuck grabbed his arm. "God! God is against thee, old man! Forbear! It's an ill voyage! Ill begun, ill continued; let me square the yards while we may, old man, and make a fair wind of it homewards, to go on a better voyage than this."

Yes, yes, at last Starbuck had said it! Fallon grabbed one of the braces; he saw others of the crew move to the rigging as if to follow Starbuck's order before it was given. They cried, some of them in relief, others in fear, others as if ready at last to mutiny. Yes!

Ahab threw down the last links of

the lightning rod. He grabbed the harpoon from the boat and waved it like a torch about his head; he lurched toward Fallon.

"You!" he shouted, staggering to maintain his balance under the tossing deck, hoisting the flaming harpoon to his shoulder as if he meant to impale Fallon on the spot. "But cast loose that rope's end and you will be transfixed — by this clear spirit!" The electricity at the barb hummed inches before him; Fallon could feel his skin prickling and smelled ozone. He felt the rail at the small of his back, cold. The other sailors fell away from the ropes; Starbuck looked momentarily sick. Fallon let go of the brace.

Ahab grinned at him. He turned and held the glowing steel before him with both hands like a priest holding a candle at mass on a feast day.

"All you oaths to hunt the white whale are as binding as mine; and heart, soul, and body, lung and life, old Ahab is bound. And that you may know to what tune this heart beats; look ye here! Thus I blow out the lastfeat!"

He blew out the flame.

They ran out the night without letting the anchors over the side, heading due into the gale instead of riding with the wind at their backs, with tarpaulins and deck truck blown or washed overboard, with the lightning rod shipped instead of trailing in the sea as it ought to, with the man at the tiller beaten

raw about the ribs trying to keep the ship straight, with the compass spinning round like a top, with the torn remains of the sails not cut away until long after midnight.

By morning the storm had much abated, the wind had come around, and they ran before it in heavy seas. Fallon and most of the other common sailors, exhausted, were allowed to sleep.

eleven

The argument with Starbuck and his attempts to rouse others to defy Ahab had made Fallon something of a pariah. He was now as isolated as he had been when he'd first come to himself aboard the *Pequod*. Only Bulkington did not treat him with contempt or fear, but Bulkington would do nothing about the situation. He would rather talk, and they often discussed what a sane man would do in their situation, given the conflicting demands of reason and duty. Fallon's ability to remain detached always failed him somewhere in the middle of these talks.

So Fallon came to look upon his stints at the masthead as escape of a sort. It was there that he had first realized that he could rise above the deck of the *Pequod*, both literally and figuratively, for some moments; it was there that he had first asserted his will after days of stunned debility. He would not sing out for the white whale, if it should be his fortune to

sight it, but he did sing out more than once for lesser whales. The leap of his heart at the sight of them was not feigned.

They were sailing the calm Pacific east and south of Japan. They had met the *Rachel*, and a thrill had run through the crew at the news that she had encountered Moby Dick and had failed to get him, losing several boats, and the captain's son, in the process. Fallon's memory was jogged. The *Rachel* would pick up Ishmael at the end of the book, when all the others were dead.

They met the *Delight*, on which a funeral was in process. From the main-mast lookout, Fallon heard the shouted talk between Ahab and her captain about another failed attempt at the white whale. He watched as the dead man, sewn up in his hammock, was dropped into the sea.

It was a clear, steel-blue day. The sea rolled in long, quiet swells; the *Pequod* moved briskly ahead before a fair breeze, until the *Delight* was lost in the distance astern. The air was fresh and clear out to the rim of the world, where it seemed to merge with the darker sea. It was as fair a day as they had seen since Fallon had first stood a watch at the masthead.

Up above the ship, almost out of the world of men entirely, rolling at the tip of the mast in rhythm to the rolling of the sea swells, which moved in time with his own easy breathing, Fallon lost his fear. He seemed to lose

even himself. Who was he? Patrick Fallon, analyst for a commodities firm. Perhaps that had been some delusion; perhaps that world had been created somewhere inside of him, pressed upon him in a vision. He was a sailor on the *Pequod*. He thought that this was part of some book, but he had not been a reader for many years.

Memories of his other life persisted. He remembered the first time he had ever made love to a woman — to Sally Torrance, in the living room of her parents' house while they were away skiing in Minnesota. He remembered cutting his palm playing baseball when the bat had shattered in his hand. The scar in the middle of his hand could not be denied.

Who denied it? He watched an albatross swoop down from above him to skim a few feet above the water, trying to snag some high-leaping fish. It turned away, unsuccessful, beating its wings slowly as it climbed the air. There was rhythm to its unconscious dance. Fallon had never seen anything more beautiful. He hung his arms over the hoop that surrounded him, felt the hot sun beating on his back, the band of metal supporting him.

This was the real world; he accepted it. He accepted the memories that contradicted it. I look, you look, he looks. Could his mind and heart hold two contradictory things? What would happen to him then? He accepted the albatross, the fish, the sharks he could see below the water's surface from his

high vantage point. He accepted the grace of the sea, its embrace or this gentlest of days, and he accepted the storm that had tried to kill them only days before. The *Delight*, reason told him — let reason be; he could strain reason no further than he had — the *Delight* might perhaps have been a ship from a story he had read, but he had no doubt that the man who had been dropped to his watery grave as Fallon watched had been a real man.

The blue of sky and sea, the sound of the flag snapping above him, the taste of the salt air, the motion of the sea and earth itself as they swung Fallon at the tip of the mast, the memories and speculations, the feel of warm sun and warm iron — all the sensual world flowed together for Fallon then. He could not say what he felt. Joy that he could hardly contain swelled in his chest. He was at one with all his perceptions, with all he knew and remembered, with Carol, wherever or whatever she might be, with Bulkington and Dagoo and Starbuck and Stein Jr. and the Big House and Queequeg and the CBT and Ahab. Ahab.

Why had Fallon struggled so long against it? He was alive. What thing had driven him to fight so hard? What had happened to him was absurd, but what thing was not absurd? What thing had made him change from the student to the dropout to the anaylyst to the sailor? Who might Patrick Fallon be? He stretched out his right arm and turned his hand in the sun.

"Is it I, or God, or who, that lifts this arm?" Fallon heard the words quite distinctly, as if they were spoken only for him, as if they were not spoken at all but were only thoughts. God perhaps did lift Fallon's arm, and if that were so, then who was Fallon to question the wisdom or purpose of the motion? It was his only to move.

A disturbance in the blue of the day.

Why should he not have a choice? Why should that God give him the feeling of freedom if in fact He was directing Fallon's every breath? Did the Fates weave this trance-like calm blue day to lead Fallon to these particular conclusions, so that not even his thoughts in the end were his own, but only the promptings of some force beyond him? And what force could that be if not the force that created this world, and who created this world but Herman Melville, a man who had been dead for a very long time, a man who had no possible connection with Fallon? And what could be the reason for the motion? If this was the real world, then why had Fallon been given the life he had lived before, tangled himself in, felt trapped within, only to be snatched away and clumsily inserted into a different fantasy? What purpose did it serve? Whose satisfaction was being sought?

The moment of wholeness died; the world dissolved into its disparate elements. The sea rolled on. The ship fought it. The wind was opposed by

straining canvas. The albatross dove once again, and skimming over the surface so fast it was a white blur, snatched a gleam of silver — a flying fish — from midflight. It settled to the ocean's surface, tearing at its prey.

The day was not so bright as it had been. Fallon tried to accept it still. He did not know if there was a malign force behind the motion of the earth in its long journey, or a beneficent one whose purpose was merely veiled to men such as himself — or no force at all. Such knowledge would not be his. He was a sailor on the *Pequod*.

Upon descending, Fallon heard from Bulkington that Starbuck and Ahab had had a conversation about turning back to Nantucket, that the mate had seemed almost to persuade the captain to give up the hunt, but that he had failed.

Fallon knew then that they must be coming to the end of the story. It would not be long before they spotted the white whale, and three days after that the *Pequod* would go down with all hands not previously killed in the encounter with the whale — save one. But Fallon had given up the idea that he might be that one. He did not, despite his problems, qualify as an Ishmael. That would be overstating his importance, he thought.

twelve

He woke suddenly to the impera-

tive buzzing of his alarm clock. His heart beat very fast. He tried to slow it by breathing deeply. Carol stirred beside him, then slept again.

He felt disoriented. He walked into the bathroom, staring, as if he had never seen it before. He slid open the mirrored door of the medicine chest and looked inside at the almost-empty tube of toothpaste, the old safety razor, the pack of double-edged blades, the darvon and tetracycline capsules, the foundation make-up. When he slid the door shut again, his tanned face looked back at him.

He was slow getting started that morning; when Carol got up, he was still drinking his coffee, with the radio playing an old Doors song in the background. Carol leaned over him, kissed the top of his head. It appeared that she loved him.

"You'd better get going," she said. "You'll be late."

He hadn't worried about being late, and it hit him for the first time what he had to do. He had to get to the Board of Trade. He'd have to talk to Stein Jr., and there would be a sheaf of notes on his desk asking him to return calls to various clients who would have rung him up while he was gone. He pulled on the jacket of his pinstriped suit, brushed back his hair, and left.

Waiting for the train, he realized that he hadn't gone anywhere to return from.

He had missed his normal train and arrived late. The streets were nowhere

near as crowded as they would have been an hour earlier. He walked north on LaSalle Avenue between the staid, dark old buildings. The sky that showed between them was bright, and already the temperature was rising; it would be a hot one. He wished it were the weekend. Was it Thursday? It couldn't still be Wednesday. He was embarrassed to realize he wasn't sure what day it was.

He saw a very pretty girl in the lobby of the Board of Trade as he entered through the revolving doors. She was much prettier than Carol, and had that unself-conscious way of walking. But she was around the corner before he had taken more than a few steps inside. He ran into Joe Wendelstadt in the elevator, and Joe began to tell him a story about Raoul Lark from Brazil who worked for Cacex in Chicago, and how Lark had tried to pick up some feminist the other night. And succeeded. Those Brazilians.

Fallon got off before Joe could reach the climax. In his office Molly, the receptionist, said Stein wanted to see him. Stein smelled of cigarettes, and Fallon suddenly became self-conscious. He had not brushed his own teeth. When did he ever forget that? Stein had an incipient zit on the end of his nose. He didn't really have anything to talk to Fallon about; he was just wasting time as usual.

Tigue was sick or on vacation.

Fallon worked through the morning on various customer accounts. He

had trouble remembering where the market had closed the day before. He had always had a trick memory for such figures, and it had given him the ability to impress a lot of people who knew just as much about the markets as he did. He spent what was left of the morning on the phone to his clients, with a quick trip down to the trading floor to talk to Parsons in the soybean pit.

Carol called and asked him if he could join her for lunch. He remembered he had a date with Kim, a woman from the CME he had met just a week before. He made his excuses to Carol and took off for the Merc.

Walking briskly west on Jackson, coming up on the bridge across the river, he realized he had been rushing around all day and yet could hardly remember what he'd done since he had woken up. He still couldn't remember whether it was Wednesday or Thursday.

As he crossed the bridge with the crowds of lunch-hour office workers, the noontime sun glared brightly for a second from the oily water of the river. Fallon's eyes did not immediately recover. He stopped walking and somebody bumped into him.

"Excuse me," he said unconsciously.

There was a moment of silence, then the noise of the city resumed, and he could see again. He stood at the side of the bridge and looked down at the water. The oil on the surface made rainbow-colored black swirls. Fallon

shook his head and went on.

Kim stood him up at the restaurant. She did not arrive to meet him, and he waited a long time by the cashier. Finally he made the woman seat him at a table for two. He looked at his watch but had some trouble reading the time. Was he due back at the office?

Just then someone sat down opposite him. It was an old man in a dark suit who had obviously undergone some great ordeal. His face held a look of great pain or sorrow — with hate burning just beneath it. Though his hair was still black (and quite unforgettably unkempt for midtown Chicago, as was his rough suit), a shock of white fell across his forehead, and a scar ran from the roots of that white hair straight down the man's face, leaping the brow and eye to continue across the left cheek, sinewing down the jaw and neck to disappear beneath his shirt collar.

He looked strangely familiar.

"It won't work," the man said. "You cannot get away. You have signed the articles, like the rest, and are in for a three-hundredth lay."

"Three-hundredth lay?" Fallon was bewildered.

"A three-hundredth part of the general catastrophe is yours. Don't thank me. It isn't necessary." The old man looked even more sorrowful and more wild, if it were possible to combine those seemingly incompatible emotions.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I

wouldn't hold you to the contract if it were strictly up to me." He shrugged his shoulders and opened his palms before him. "But it isn't."

Fallon's heart was beating fast again. "I don't remember any contract. You're not one of my clients. I don't trade for you. I've been in this business for a long time, mister, and I know better than to sign...."

The wildness swelled in the man. There was something burning in him, and he looked about to scream, or cry.

"I have been in the business longer than *you!*" He swung his leg out from beneath the table and rapped it loudly with his knuckle. Fallon saw that the leg was of white bone. "And I can tell *you* that you signed the contract when you signed aboard this ship — there's no other way to get aboard — and you must serve until you strike land again or it sinks beneath you!"

The diners in the restaurant dined on, oblivious. Fallon looked toward the plate glass at the front of the room and saw the water rising rapidly up it, sea-green and turbid, as the restaurant and the city fell to the bottom of the sea.

thirteen

Once again he was jerked awake, this time by the din of someone beating on the deck of the forecastle above them with a club. The other sleepers were as startled as Fallon. He rolled out of the hammock with the mists of

his dream still clinging to him, pulled on his shirt and scrambled up to the deck.

Ahab was stalking the quarter-deck in a frenzy of impatience. "Man the mastheads!" he shouted.

The men who had risen with Fallon did just that, some of them only half-dressed. Fallon was one of the first up and gained one of the hoops at the main masthead. Three others stood on the mainyard below him. Fallon scanned the horizon and saw off to starboard and about a mile ahead of them the jet of mist that indicated a whale. As it rose and fell in its course through the rolling seas, Fallon saw that it was white.

"What do you see?" Ahab called from far below. Had he noticed Fallon's gaze fixed on the spot in front of them?

"Nothing! Nothing, sir!" Fallon called. Ahab and the men on deck looked helpless so far below him. Fallon did not know if his lying would work, but there was the chance that the other men in the rigging, not being as high as he, would not be able to make out Moby Dick from their lower vantage points. He turned away from the whale and made a good show of scanning the empty horizon.

"Top gallant sails! — stunsails! Alow and aloft, and on both sides!" Ahab ordered. The men fixed a line from the mainmast to the deck, looped its lower end around Ahab's rigid leg. Ahab wound the rope around his

shoulders and arm, and they hoisted him aloft, twisting with the pressure of the hemp, toward the masthead. He twirled slowly as they raised him up, and his line of sight was obscured by the rigging and sails he had to peer through.

Before they had lifted him two-thirds of the way up, he began to shout.

"There she blows! — there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It is Moby Dick!"

Fallon knew enough to begin shouting and pointing immediately, and the men at the other two masts did the same. Within a minute everyone who had remained on the deck was in the rigging trying to catch a glimpse of the creature they had sought, half of them doubting his existence, for so many months.

Fallon looked down toward the helmsman, who stood on his toes, the whalebone tiller under his arm, arching his neck trying to see the whale.

The others in the rigging were now arguing about who had spotted Moby Dick first, with Ahab the eventual victor. It was his fate, he said, to be the one to first spot the whale. Fallon couldn't argue with that.

Ahab was lowered to the deck, giving orders all the way, and three boats were swung outboard in preparation for the chase. Starbuck was ordered to stay behind and keep the ship.

As they chased the whale, the sea became calmer, so the rowing became

easier — though just as back-breaking — and they knifed through the water, here as placid as a farm pond, faster than ever. Accompanying the sound of their own wake, Fallon heard the wake of the whale they must be approaching. He strained arms, back, and legs, pulling harder in time to Stubb's cajoling chant, and the rushing grew. He snatched a glance over his shoulder, turned to the rowing, then looked again.

The white whale glided through the sea smoothly, giving the impression of immeasurable strength. The wake he left was as steady as that of a schooner; the bow waves created by the progress of his broad, blank brow through the water fanned away in precise lines whose angle with respect to the massive body did not change. The three whaleboats rocked gently as they broke closer through these successive waves; the foam of Moby Dick's wake was abreast of them now, and Fallon saw how quickly it subsided into itself, giving the sea back its calm face, innocent of knowledge of the creature that had passed. Attendant white birds circled above their heads, now and then falling to or rising from the surface in busy flutterings of wings and awkward beaks. One of them had landed on the broken shaft of a harpoon that protruded from the snow-white whale's humped back; it bobbed up and down with the slight rocking of the whale in its long, muscular surging through the sea. Oblivious. Strangely quiet. Fallon

felt as if they had entered a magic circle.

He knew Ahab's boat, manned by the absurd Filipinos, was ahead of them and no doubt preparing to strike first. Fallon closed his eyes, pulled on his oar, and wished for it not to happen. For it to stop now, or just continue without any change. He felt as if he could row a very long time; he was no longer tired or afraid. He just wanted to keep rowing, feeling the rhythm of the work, hearing the low and insistent voice of Stubb telling them to break their backs. Fallon wanted to listen to the rushing white sound of the whale's wake in the water, to know that they were perhaps keeping pace with it, to know that, if he should tire, he could look for a second over his shoulder and find Moby Dick there still. Let the monomaniac stand in the bow of his boat — if he was meant to stand there, if it was an unavoidable necessity — let him stand there with the raised lance and concentrate his hate into one purified moment of will. Let him send that will into the tip of that lance so that it might physically glow with the frustrated obtuseness of it. Let him stand there until he froze from the suspended desire, and let the whale swim on.

Fallon heard a sudden increase in the rushing of the water, several inarticulate cries. He stopped pulling, as did the others, and turned to look in time to see the whale lift itself out of the water, exposing flanks and flukes

the bluish white of cemetery marble, and flip its huge tail upward to dive perpendicularly into the sea. Spray drenched them, and sound returned with the crash of the waves coming together to fill the vacuum left by the departure of the creature that had seconds before given weight and direction, place, to the placeless expanse of level waters. The birds circled above the subsiding foam.

They lifted their oars. They waited. "An hour," Ahab said.

They waited. It was another beautiful day. The sky was hard and blue as the floor of the swimming pool where he had met Carol. Fallon wondered again if she missed him, if he had indeed disappeared from that other life when he had taken up residence in this one — but he thrust those thoughts away. They were meaningless. There was no time in that world after his leaving it; that world did not exist, or if it existed, the order of its existence was not of the order of the existence of the rough wood he sat on, the raw flesh of his hands and the air he breathed. Time was the time between the breaths he drew. Time was the duration of the dream he had had about being back in Chicago, and he could not say how long that had been, even if it had begun or ended. He might be dreaming still. The word "dream" was meaningless, and "awake." And "real," and "insane," and "known," and all those other interesting words he had once known. Time was waiting for

Moby Dick to surface again.

The breeze freshened. The sea began to swell.

"The birds! — the birds!" Tashtego shouted, so close behind Fallon's ear that he winced. The Indian half-stood, rocking the whaleboat as he pointed to the sea birds, which had risen and were flying toward Ahab's boat twenty yards away.

"The whale will breach there," Stubb said.

Ahab was up immediately. Peering into the water, he leaned on the steering oar and reversed the orientation of his boat. He then exchanged places with Fedallah, the other men reaching up to help him through the rocking boat. He picked up the harpoon, and the oarsmen stood ready to row.

Fallon looked down into the sea, trying to make out what Ahab saw. Nothing, until a sudden explosion of white as the whale, rocketing upward, turned over as it finally hit the surface. In a moment Ahab's boat was in the whale's jaws, Ahab in the bows almost between them. Stubb was shouting and gesturing, and Fallon's fellows fell to the oars in a disorganized rush. The Filipinos in the lead boat crowded into the stern while Ahab, like a man trying to open a recalcitrant garage door, tugged and shoved at Moby Dick's jaw, trying insanely to dislodge the whale's grip. Within seconds filled with crashing water, cries and confusion, Moby Dick had bitten the boat in two, and Ahab had belly-flopped over the side

like a swimming-class novice.

Moby Dick then began to swim tight circles around the smashed boat and its crew. Ahab struggled to keep his head above water. Neither Stubb nor Flask could bring his boat close enough to pick him up. The *Pequod* was drawing nearer, and finally Ahab was able to shout loudly enough to be heard, "Sail on the whale — drive him off!"

It worked. The *Pequod* picked up the remnants of the whaleboat while Fallon and the others dragged its crew and Ahab into their own boat.

The old man collapsed in the bottom of the boat, gasping for breath, broken and exhausted. He moaned and shook. Fallon was sure he was finished whale chasing, that Stubb and the others would see the man was used up, that Starbuck would take over and sail them home. But in a minute or two Ahab was leaning on his elbow asking after his boat's crew, and a few minutes after that they had resumed the chase with double oarsmen in Stubb's boat.

Moby Dick drew steadily away as exhaustion wore them down. Fallon did not feel he could row any more after all. The *Pequod* picked them up and they gave chase in vain under all sail until dark.

fourteen

On the second day's chase all three boats were smashed in. Many men suf-

fered sprains and contusions, and one was bitten by a shark. Ahab's whalebone leg was shattered, with a splinter driven into his own flesh. Fedallah, who had been the captain's second shadow, was tangled in the line Ahab had shot into the white whale, dragged out of the boat, and drowned. Moby Dick escaped.

fifteen

It came down to what Fallon had known it would come down to eventually.

In the middle of that night he went to talk to Ahab, who slept in one of the hatchways as he had the night before. The carpenter was making him another leg, wooden this time, and Ahab was curled sullenly in the dark lee of the after scuttle. Fallon did not know whether he was waiting or asleep.

He started down the stairs, hesitated on the second step. Ahab lifted his head. "What do you need?" he asked.

Fallon wondered what he wanted to say. He looked at the man huddled in the darkness and tried to imagine what moved him, tried to see him as a man instead of a thing. Was it possible he was only a man, or had Fallon himself become stylized and distorted by living in the book of Melville's imagination?

"You said — talking to Starbuck today — you said that everything that happens is fixed, decreed. You said it was rehearsed a billion years before

any of it took place. Is it true?"

Ahab straightened and leaned toward Fallon, bringing his face into the dim light thrown by the lamps on deck. He looked at him for a moment in silence.

"I don't know. So it seemed as the words left my lips. The Parsee is dead before me, as he foretold. I don't know."

"That is why you're hunting the whale."

"That is why I'm hunting the whale."

"How can this hunt, how can killing an animal tell you anything? How can it justify your life? What satisfaction can it give you in the end, even if you boil it all down to oil, even if you cut Moby Dick into bible-leaves and eat him? I don't understand it."

The captain looked at him earnestly. He seemed to be listening, and leaping ahead of the questions. It was very dark in the scuttle, and they could hardly see each other. Fallon kept his hands folded tightly behind him. The blade of the cleaver he had shoved into his belt lay cool against the skin at the small of his back; it was the same knife he used to butcher the whale.

"If it is immutably fixed, then it does not matter what I do. The purpose and meaning are out of my hands, and thine. We have only to take our parts, to be the thing that it is written for us to be. Better to live that role given us than to struggle against it or play the coward, when the actions

must be the same nonetheless. Some say I am mad to chase the whale. Perhaps I am mad. But if it is my destiny to seek him, to tear, to burn and kill those things that stand in my path — then the matter of my madness is not relevant, do you see?"

He was not speaking in character.

"If these things are not fixed, and it was not my destiny to have my leg taken by the whale, to have my hopes blasted in this chase, then how cruel a world it is. No mercy, no power but its own controls it; it blights our lives out of merest whim. No, not whim, for there would then be no will behind it, no builder of this Bedlam hospital, and in the madhouse, when the keeper is gone, what is to stop the inmates from doing as they please? In a universe of cannibals, where all creatures have preyed upon each other, carrying on an eternal war since the world began, why should I not exert my will in whatever direction I choose? Why should I not bend others to my will?" The voice was reasonable, and tired. "Have I answered your question?"

Fallon felt the time drawing near. He felt light, as if the next breeze might lift him from the deck and carry him away. "I have an idea," he said. "My idea is — and it is an idea I have had for some time now, and despite everything that has happened, and what you say, I can't give it up — my idea is that all that is happening..." Fallon waved his hand at the world, "...is a story. It is a book written by a man named Her-

man Melville and told by a character named Ishmael. You are the main character in the book. All the things that have happened are events in the book.

"My idea also is that I am not from the book, or at least I wasn't originally. Originally I lived a different life in another time and place, a life in the real world and not in a book. It was not ordered and plotted like a book, and...."

Ahab interrupted in a quiet voice: "You call this an ordered book? I see no order. If it were so orderly, why would the whale task me so?"

Fallon knotted his fingers still tighter behind him. Ahab was going to make him do it. He felt the threads of the situation weaving together to create only that bloody alternative, of all the alternatives that might be. In the open market, the price for the future and price for the physical reality converged on delivery day.

"The order's not an easy thing to see, I'll admit," Fallon said. He laughed nervously.

Ahab laughed louder. "It certainly is not. And how do you know this other life you speak of was not a play? A different kind of play. How do you know your thoughts are your own? How do you know that this dark little scene was not prepared just for us, or perhaps for someone who is reading about us at this very moment and wondering about the point of the drama just as much as we wonder at the pointlessness of our lives?" Ahab's voice rose,

gaining an edge of compulsion. "How do we know anything?" He grabbed his left wrist, pinched the flesh and shook it.

"How do we know what lies behind this matter? This flesh is a wall, the painting over the canvas, the mask drawn over the player's face, the snow fallen over the fertile field, or perhaps the scorched earth. I know there is something there; there must be something, but it cannot be touched because we are smothered in this flesh, this life. How do we know —"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Fallon shouted. "Please stop asking things! You should not be able to say things like that to me! Ahab does not talk to me!"

"Isn't this what I am supposed to say?"

Fallon shuddered.

"Isn't this scene in your book?"

He was dizzy, sick. "No! Of course not!"

"Then why does that disturb you? Doesn't this prove that we are not pieces of a larger dream, that this is a real world, that the blood that flows within our veins is real blood, that the pain we feel has meaning, that the things we do have consequence? We break the mold of existence by existing. Isn't that reassurance enough?" Ahab was shouting now, and the men awake on deck trying to get the boats in shape for that last day's chase and the *Pequod*'s ultimate destruction put aside their hammers and rope and listened now to Ahab's justification.

It was time. Fallon, shaking with

anger and fear, drew the knife from behind him and leapt at the old man. In bringing up the blade for the attack he hit it against the side of the narrow hatchway. His grip loosened. Ahab threw up his hands, and despite the difference in age and mobility between them, managed to grab Fallon's wrist before he could strike the killing blow. Instead, the deflected cleaver struck the beam beside Ahab's head and stuck there. As Fallon tried to free it, Ahab brought his forearm up and smashed him beneath the jaw. Fallon fell backward, striking his head with stunning force against the opposite side of the scuttle. He momentarily lost consciousness.

When he came to himself again, Ahab was sitting before him with his strong hands on Fallon's shoulders, supporting him, not allowing him to move.

"Good, Fallon, good," he said. "You've done well. But now, no more games, no more dramas, no easy way out. Admit that this is not the tale you think it is! Admit that you do not know what will happen to you in the next second, let alone the next day or year! Admit that we are both free and unfree, alone and crowded in by circumstance in this world that we indeed did not make, but indeed have the power to affect! Put aside those notions that there is another life somehow more real than the life you live now, another air to breathe somehow more pure, another love or hate some-

how more vital than the love or hate you bear me. Put aside your fantasy and admit that you are alive, and thus may momentarily die. Do you hear me, Fallon?"

Fallon heard, and saw, and felt and

touched, but he did not know. The *Pequod*, freighted with savages and isolatoes, sailed into the night, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

EVAN WILLIAM PHILLIPS

I met Evan Phillips in the early 1960's when we were both living in Greenwich Village. I had just signed on as managing editor of F&SF, and I asked him to join the staff as copy editor. Evan was more than qualified for the job. He was working at the time as an editor on the Random House Dictionary. He seemed interested in everything, especially politics, railroads and U.S. history.

For close to twenty years, every story in this magazine has passed through Evan's hands. To my mind he was the perfect copy editor: careful, picky and knowledgable, willing and able to defend every mark he made on a manuscript. He was a traditionalist in matters of basic style, but he had a light touch and was scrupulous about not tampering with a writer's distinctive voice.

His closest friend, Linda Bowman, sent the following biographical notes:

Evan Phillips was born July 7, 1929 in Parkersburg, W. Va. Both his grandfathers were coal miners. He loved the Ohio River, the valley and hills, the railroad trains that stopped in the yards there. He served in the Marine Corps from 1950-54 and was graduated from Ohio State University in 1956 with a BA in history. He lived in New York City, then returned to Columbus, then moved to Boston in 1978. He loved the city, the harbor, the factories and old buildings. He died May 10, 1982, of a stroke at Boston City Hospital, leaving bereft in Boston a friend and two gray kittens.

—E.L.F.

Lisa Tuttle's new story is about a young couple who acquire an old chest that is wooden, quite lovely, and quite possibly haunted. Ms. Tuttle's "The Bone Flute" F&SF, May 1981) recently won the SFWA Nebula award for best short story of the year.

The Memory of Wood

BY

LISA TUTTLE

It was a beautiful chest. The hard, dark old wood gleamed in the sunlight, looking rich and exotic against the bright green grass.

Helen and Rob saw it at the same time and glanced at each other swiftly, smiling in shared delight. Helen shifted the baby in her arms, looked down to see that Julian had not strayed, and followed her husband. They made their way among the furniture, the bits and pieces of a life scattered on the big front lawn, towards the thing they had, in that instant, made up their minds to buy.

"It's lovely," she said softly, watching her husband run his hand across the smooth grain of the lid.

"It'll cost," he said. His voice was dreamy.

"But we need it. Don't we?"

"We could keep blankets in it," he said. "Let me see how it opens." He

crouched on the grass and she moved near, standing over him. The chest wasn't locked; the hinged lid came up smoothly and quietly under his hands.

Helen clutched the baby closer and drew back, nearly stumbling. Her stomach twisted. The stench was horrible: sweet and rotten, with something nasty underneath. She made a small, despairing sound.

Rob looked up at her, frowning. "I thought I — "

"That smell."

"Yes" He was still frowning, puzzled. "I thought I caught a whiff of something horrible, but — " He sniffed loudly, obviously, moving his head above the open chest. "Nothing, now."

"Are you sure?" Cautiously, she breathed through her nose again, and smelled nothing unusual, but she hesitated to move closer, to lean into the chest as Rob was doing.

"I'm sure," he said.

She looked down at the chest, her pleasure broken.

Rob lowered the lid gently and stood up. "It could go in the living room, beneath the Clarke print. Next to the red chair."

"People would use it as a table then, put drinks down on it and spoil the finish."

He smiled at her. "We could put out coasters when we serve drinks."

"Take baby for a minute, would you?" She flexed her arms when the weight was gone, and bent over the chest, stroking it with her finger tips. The wood was as sleek and satin-smooth as she had imagined. "Whose estate was this?" she asked. "Somebody really took care of this chest. She must have rubbed it with oil and polished it every week to get the wood like this."

"Some old woman who just died," Rob said, glancing up at the elaborate gingerbread of the house. "She was all alone, no family, no children. An old maid."

Helen hesitated, wanting to turn her back and walk away. She told herself she was being silly. Her fingers found the edge of the lid and she lifted.

They both sniffed, and looked at each other. They smelled nothing but the sun, the grass, the faint scents of musty furnishings exposed to the open air, the perfumes of people drifting around them.

"Maybe," said Rob.

"We didn't imagine it."

"No, but maybe it wasn't the chest at all. It might have been a coincidence that we smelled it when I first lifted the lid. Maybe it was someone passing by —"

Helen giggled. "Anyone who smells like *that* and is still walking around —!" She lowered the lid.

"It'll cost," said Rob. "But not like it would if we bought it from a dealer."

Julian let out a crow of pleasure and began running away at top speed on his fat, stumpy legs. Helen looked around and saw that he had sighted a leashed poodle. She winced, seeing his inevitable tumble a split second before it happened, and started after him, to comfort him. But Julian took the fall with his usual uncomplaining good nature; it was baby Alice, safe in her father's arms, who began to scream as Rob bent down to examine the chest again.

They spent more than they could realistically afford, but less — they were certain — than the beautifully made chest was worth. They were well pleased with themselves as they drove home from the estate sale, the chest in the back seat with Julian.

None of their furniture had been bought new; all of it had come as hand-me-downs from family or had been bought at garage sales, auctions, flea markets and junk shops. What had started as economic necessity had grown into a point of pride. No shod-

dy, mass-produced contemporary furniture for Helen and Rob. They favored dark wood, intricately carved high-backed sofas and chairs with velvet cushions, glass-fronted bookcases and ancient, hand-made wardrobes. The chest was simple, but old and beautiful. It would fit in with the rest of their furniture.

When they had put it in place that night, in the living room near the red-velvet chair and the ornately tassled floor lamp, beneath the black-and-white lithograph of a man on a lonely road, Helen opened the lid. Her hand flew to her mouth and she gagged at the rich and rotten smell of something dead. With an effort, Helen held back the rush of sickness, but tears came to her eyes.

"Rob," she called weakly.

He came at once with the beers he had fetched to toast their new treasure. "Darling, what's wrong?"

"The smell," she said hopelessly.

Rob went to the chest and leaned into it. Watching, Helen felt the sudden urge to pull him back to safety. He looked around, shrugging. "Honestly, darling, I can't smell anything. Some old dust, maybe."

She let herself breathe again. He was right; the smell was gone. But it must be lurking within the chest, every opening releasing it.

"It was that same horrible smell," she said. "The minute I opened the chest, there it was."

He gazed into the chest thoughtful-

ly; put in one hand to stroke the interior. "I suppose it could be something ... maybe some food that went bad, or maybe a rat got inside and died there long ago. Wood holds a smell for a long time."

Helen nodded bleakly. The odor, brief though it had been, had disturbed her profoundly. "I wish we hadn't bought it. I can't bear that smell. I don't want it in the house."

Rob frowned and said, "You wanted it as much as I did. We agreed on it."

"I know. I fell in love with the way it looked. But I didn't know — honestly, Rob, I can't live with it!"

"Do you smell anything now?"

She shook her head. "No, but I did when I first opened it. I know I did. And if that's going to happen every time I open it —"

"It won't. We'll fumigate it. We'll clean it out with disinfectant and then put some of those whaddaya-callems inside. Sachets. Oranges stuffed with cloves. I used to make them for my aunts every Christmas, and they'd put them in the big trunk where they kept the quilts. It's a great smell, that orange and clove among the blankets." He looked at her earnestly, eyes compelling her agreement. Weakly, to avoid an argument, Helen nodded. But she didn't believe his prediction. That horrible smell was somehow trapped in the chest, and it would not go away. Wood had a memory for smell that soap, disinfectant and perfume could

not erase.

She thought of the chest of drawers that was now in the baby's room. She had inherited it in college, when her roommate left to get married. Helen never knew whether Jenny had spilled perfume in the bottom drawer or if the smell had simply lingered from the clothes she had kept there — in either case, although Helen had cleaned out the drawer with soap and water and lined it with fresh paper, whenever she pulled out that bottom drawer she was tempted to look around, thinking that Jenny had come into the room. The fragrance was transmitted from the drawer to whatever clothes she kept there, although it was faint and did not last long. But the scent never left the wood, although it had been nearly six years since the chest had been Jenny's.

Wood remembers, she thought, and as if he had read her mind, Rob said, 'Look, as long as any of the bad smell lingers, we don't have to use it to store anything. It's still a beautiful-looking chest, even if we don't use it. We don't have to keep opening the lid. But I'm sure it won't last. Tomorrow why don't you teach Julian how to make a pomander out of an orange and cloves?"

She smiled at him, relieved that they weren't going to argue after all. "Julian will only stick the cloves up his nose," she said. "If he doesn't eat them first." She closed the lid.

* * *

A baby's crying woke Helen in the night. This was not unusual. What was unusual was that she didn't think it was Alice crying, and the sound didn't come from the nursery. Some odd trick of acoustics, or perhaps her sleepy mind, made the sound seem to come from the direction of the living room.

Nevertheless, Helen got up, tied her robe around her, and went into the next room to check. She found Alice sleeping soundly. As she looked down at the sleeping baby, she heard the crying again, distant and muffled.

A feeling of dread pushed at her heart. Moving slowly, she followed the sound. It had died away again by the time she stood in the living room, but it seemed still to ring in the air. She turned on a lamp and looked around the room, her eyes and attention drawn by the chest. It was no longer beautiful, but dark and menacing. Hastily, Helen switched off the light. Darkness was better. She didn't want to see the chest and think about opening it. She waited, praying she would not hear the crying again, praying that it had not come from the chest.

She waited long minutes in the darkness and the silence, and then went back to bed. In the morning she decided it had been a dream.

Helen was ironing in the kitchen half-listening to the soap opera on the television set out of sight in the next room. The baby was in her mechanical swing, creaking back and forth beside

her, and Julian was playing in the living room. Helen's mind was just registering the fact that her son was being too quiet when from the living room came a soft but definite thud, and Julian made the noise he made to signify disgust or displeasure. Alice's face puckered and she began to cry. Helen caught a whiff of something rotten.

"Julian," she said sharply. She set down the iron and rushed into the living room, ignoring the baby's cries.

She found her son standing before the open chest, a look of intense interest on his face as he stared down into it. Apprehension twisted her stomach and she caught Julian's arms and pulled him away from whatever it was that so fascinated him. He cried out his annoyance and hit her ineffectually, squirming to get free. Helen held him tightly and turned him away from the chest. Then, curious about what in that empty wooden box could have caught his attention, she turned back for a look.

It wasn't empty. For just a moment she saw — or thought she saw — the chest stuffed with bundles of old, yellowed newspapers. But when she frowned and began to move closer, she saw that of course it was empty. There was nothing inside it. The chest was empty as it had been when they brought it home the day before.

Helen turned her attention to her wriggling son. "Julian," she said, trying to keep her voice calm but firm.

"That's a no-no. You must not open the chest. Understand me? The chest is not a toy. You are not to open it. You must not play with it. Understand?"

He scowled up at her, obviously disagreeing but finding his small vocabulary inadequate to tell her so. Alice, in the kitchen, was still crying. Helen sighed.

"Go on and play with your toys, Julian. Not the chest. I mean it."

She let go of him and went to close the lid. For a moment she stared down into the chest, wondering about the newspapers. What had made her imagine the chest was filled with newspapers, something wrapped in newspaper and packed away in the chest? No answer occurred to her, so she closed the lid, then went to see about the baby.

Alice simply wanted to be held and, after a few minutes of attention, she had calmed down and was agreeable to being put back in her swing. Helen went back to the living room to check on Julian.

And found him, as she had more than half-expected, again standing before the open chest, clearly fascinated by whatever he imagined he saw inside.

"Julian."

Obviously he did not hear the threat in her voice, for he looked up brightly, blue eyes shining and round face puckered with interest. "Baby," he said.

"Julian, what did I tell you about

that chest?" She advanced upon him.

The bright interest went out of his face, and he looked stubborn. "Me see," he said firmly.

"It's not a toy, Julian. I told you before you are not to play with it. You must *not* open it. Don't open it again." She shut the lid.

"Me see," he said again, his chubby hands creeping for the edge of the lid.

"No." Helen caught his hands and held them. "No. Leave the chest alone, Julian. I mean it. You're going to be in big trouble if you do that again." She looked into his stubborn face and knew he would go to the chest as soon as her back was turned. Threats did not work with him, so she would have to distract him.

"Well, big boy," she said cheerfully, hoisting him up in her arms. "Why don't you play with your old mommy for a while? You want to play with your choo-choos? You want to play choo-choo trains with Mommy?" She carried him away, bouncing him slightly in her arms and asking questions, taking him away from the sight of the wooden chest.

For the rest of the day she kept an eye on Julian, never giving him the chance to go back to the chest. But in the evening, sitting with her family watching television, she was struck by how often Julian turned his head to look at the chest. In particular, she was struck by the way he looked at the chest.

Later, when Julian had been put to

bed, she tried to explain her unease to Rob. "He'd get a look on his face, as if he'd heard something, and then he'd turn and look straight at the chest. As if the sound came from the chest. Except that there wasn't any sound. Why is he so fascinated by it? Why does he want to keep opening it?"

"Because you've made such a big deal out of it," Rob said easily. "He opened it once, out of natural curiosity, and you hit the ceiling. Naturally that made him curious. He can't figure out what is so special about it. He's a kid who doesn't like to be told no, especially without a reason."

"If you could have seen him, Rob, staring into.... He was seeing something, I'm sure of it. But there's nothing there." She stopped short of telling him what she had briefly, oddly imagined: the old, crumpled newspapers which seemed to fill the chest.

"So? It's big and dark and empty. To a kid, it's interesting. Why are you so worried about it?"

She saw from his face that he expected some irrational response, that he was ready to make fun of "women's intuition." She said calmly, "Rob, he could get hurt. If he decided to play inside it, he might shut himself in and suffocate."

"Oh, come on, Helen. You'd hear him and find him long before that could happen."

"What if the lid slammed down? It's heavy enough to break his hand."

"Yeah, yeah," Rob said. "But there are lots of other ways he could get hurt around the house — more likely ways. It's silly to worry —"

"It's not silly! I've caught him opening the chest twice, and he'll try again, I know it."

"All right, all right." He held up a placating hand. "Don't get so upset. Maybe we could put something on the chest that he'd have trouble getting off."

Helen nodded grudgingly and the discussion was over, but she was far from satisfied. She wished they had never bought the thing.

Something was wrong. Helen swam up out of sleep, drawn by the sound of a baby crying.

Then she was wide awake, listening and remembering. This was no dream. A baby was crying, somewhere in the house. It was not Alice — to Helen's ears the cry sounded like that of a much younger infant, a newborn child. The muffled sound came, she thought, from the living room.

She looked resentfully at Rob. He could sleep through anything. There had been a time, just after Julian's birth, when Helen had seen Rob's regular, undisturbed slumber as a sign of hostility toward her and their child. Logically, she knew he did not will his sleeping patterns. And she was used to it, now.

Gradually the crying was fading, and Helen thought she might be able to go to sleep after all. Then she heard the

soft, unmistakable patter of Julian's feet in the hall, going towards the living room, and she sat up in bed. Had Julian heard the crying, too?

Heart thumping unpleasantly, Helen got up and went to check.

Julian was standing in the dark living room, a few feet from the chest. He turned and looked at his mother when she came into the room. He pointed to the chest. "Baby," he said.

Helen felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. "No," she said. "No baby. Come back to bed, Julian. You must have been dreaming."

He shook his head emphatically and walked closer to the chest. "Baby," he said firmly.

"No," she said sharply, seeing Julian's hands straying to the lid. "What did I tell you about that? Let Mommy open it."

So now she had to. It was foolish to be afraid of opening the chest, Helen thought. She had opened it before and she knew there was nothing in it. She turned on the lamp, and Julian flinched and squinted and put his hands to his eyes at the sudden flash of soft yellow light.

Helen raised the lid. She saw shadows, the faded yellow and black of old newspapers. Something deep inside that paper nest stirred faintly, and the packing rustled and settled around it.

The chest was empty. Helen stared into it, not trusting her eyes. Dark and deep and empty. She put her hand in

and felt the smooth wood of the walls. Bile rose in her throat at the faint whiff of decay, but whether she had smelled it or only remembered smelling it, Helen could not have said.

Beside her Julian was silent, also staring into the chest.

"You see?" she said, making an effort. "It's empty."

Julian nodded and looked up at her gravely.

"There's nothing in the chest," Helen said. "It was only a dream. Now let's go back to bed."

But it had been no dream, she thought, taking Julian's soft little hand in her own. They had both heard the baby cry.

The chest is haunted, Helen thought as she climbed back in bed beside her sleeping husband. There was a kind of relief in the thought: the problem had been identified. But her spirits sank again at the thought of trying to explain her certainty to Rob. He would be scornful of her silly fears; he would not understand. And yet she had to tell him, she had to make him believe her, because she would not go on living with that chest. There was something evil about it. The past, whatever its past had been, still lived on inside it, manifested in a baby's cry, a foul odor, and the teasing visual image of the chest packed with newspaper.

How to make Rob understand? She could already hear his objections, his refusal to sell the chest. It was a

beautiful piece of furniture and they had paid a lot for it. Was she crazy?

Helen tossed and turned, wide awake, trying to find a way out. Perhaps she should say nothing to Rob and simply get rid of the chest while he was at work. Afterwards, she would face his anger as the lesser of two evils. At least then the chest would be gone.

By morning, Helen had neither slept nor decided what to do. She watched Rob as he rose and moved around the room getting dressed.

"Do you believe things can be haunted?" she asked him.

He gave her a quizzical look. "You mean like a house."

"A house, a room, a piece of furniture."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"All sorts of people have seen them, you know. At least, something they call ghosts. Don't you think that something, like a strong personality or a violent occurrence, could leave an impression, like a recording, on the place where it happened?"

He shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed, buttoning his shirt. "I heard some kind of theory about that. That ghosts are like photographs or movies or recordings that receptive people can tune in to."

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know. I've never seen one myself."

"What if we lived in a haunted house. If we saw a ghost. Would you want to move?"

"Well, that depends on the ghost, and the house. How would this ghost make itself known?"

"It might cry and howl and wake us up at night."

He laughed and patted her blanket-covered leg. "Wake you up at night. I don't think it would bother me much."

"It wouldn't bother you? To hear it crying all the time?" She was trembling and moved further beneath the covers, hoping he wouldn't notice.

Rob shrugged and stood up. "I don't think I'd sell the house on account of it. It doesn't sound like a problem the magnitude of our plumbing."

"But what if it did something else? It might be dangerous," Helen said. Rob was leaving the room, tired of the abstract discussion. Tears came to her eyes and she buried her face in the pillow. It was hopeless. He wouldn't understand. He wouldn't agree.

She dragged through the day after he had left, wanting a nap but not daring to leave Julian unattended. It seemed that every time her back was turned he escaped to the living room where she would find him raising the lid for another look inside, or pressing his ear against the chest, or simply standing before it, staring intently, as if it told him things no one else could comprehend. She could almost hear Rob scoffing at her for imagining things, but she knew Julian's interest in the chest was neither normal nor safe. She knew she had to get rid of the chest.

* * *

The baby was crying again. Helen's eyes came open on darkness. The muffled sound came from the living room, from within the wooden chest. She clenched her teeth together. It would pass. The sound would fade and die away. She wasn't going to get up this time and go to the living room and open the chest and assure herself it was still empty. She would wait it out. And tomorrow she would take the chest out and sell it to the first furniture-dealer she found, and worry about the lies or explanations for Rob later. She wondered if Julian was awake and listening, too. She could imagine him in the living room, crouching beside the dark bulk of the chest.

She shivered and moved closer to Rob's warmth. When would it stop crying? How long did she have to listen to it?

It occurred to her then that if Rob could hear it she would not be alone, and she would not be so afraid. And he might understand. Heartened, she sat up and began to shake her husband, calling his name. Waking him in the mornings on the rare occasions when he overslept was hard enough; waking him in the middle of the night was all but impossible.

"Rob! Wake up, wake up, wake up." She tickled him and blew in his ear, but got in response only the sluggish motion as he moved away from her, still holding on to sleep.

"Rob, wake up. Wake up,

This is important. Rob. Robert! Damn."

Sighing noisily, Helen rose and went down the hall to the bathroom to fetch a wet towel. Drastic measures were called for. For a wonder, the crying had not died away. She hoped it would go on long enough for Rob to hear it. Returning from the bathroom, she glanced into Julian's room and saw his bed was empty. Well, she knew where he was. Right now the important thing was to wake Rob.

The wet towel did the trick. At last he was moving, fending her off, eyelids fluttering to reveal flashes of blue.

"Whatsamatta — whatsamatta — hey — Helen, what's wrong?"

She let out a sigh of relief as he sat bolt-upright in bed, indisputably awake. She clutched his arm. "Hush. Listen. Tell me what you hear."

He stared at her. "What's wrong?"

"Hush, just listen," she said. She could hear it still, but faintly — a distant, gasping cry that was fading away.

Rob was silent for a moment, frowning, then he shook his head. "What did you hear?" he asked quietly. "Someone at the door? Someone in the house?"

Helen shook her head, despairing. If he hadn't heard it, then he would not. The crying had faded altogether now; she could no longer hear it.

"A baby," she said hopelessly. "A baby crying."

Rob swore and threw himself back

on the bed. "You couldn't go check on her yourself? You woke me for that?"

"Not Alice," Helen said. "It was another baby crying. I've heard it the past two nights. The sound doesn't come from Alice's room. It's in the living room. Inside the chest."

Rob turned over, burying his face in the pillow, and did not answer. Helen had no heart to try to explain what she meant, to struggle with his anger and sleepy incomprehension. He had not heard and he would not understand. She lay back down, longing for the oblivion of sleep.

But she couldn't stop thinking of the chest. It was almost as if it was calling to her. She wanted to go to it and raise the heavy lid and look inside yet again, to assure herself that there was nothing there. But she knew there was nothing inside. How many times did she have to look before she believed?

There is no baby there, she told herself. No crying, no newspapers, nothing. I will stay here in my bed and go back to sleep.

Helen heard Julian's footsteps in the hallway, going towards his room.

It's over, she told herself. Even Julian knows that. And this is the last night I will suffer this. In the morning the chest goes.

She did not sleep again. She lay in bed until it was light, and the thought of the chest was like a suffocating weight. When she heard Julian stirring in his room, she knew it was time to get up. While she was in the bathroom,

she heard the front door open and slam and knew that Julian had run outside, as he often did, to bring the morning paper in for his parents.

In the kitchen she went through the motions of making a pot of coffee while her mind puzzled over the fact that she had not yet heard a sound from Alice, and the oddity that Julian had not rushed into the kitchen, eager to be praised for bringing her the paper. Moving slowly, wearily, Helen went back to check on her family.

Rob, she saw from the doorway, was still sacked out, the alarm buzzing steadily and to no effect directly into his ear. The interruption of his sleep during the night meant she would have another battle to wake him, and he would be grumpy all day.

And Alice —

— was not in her crib.

Helen stared down, disbelieving, at the bare sheet. Alice was much too small to have gotten out of bed on her own. "Julian," she called, rushing into the living room. "Julian!"

He was sitting on the floor beside the open chest, the newspaper spread out around him. He was tearing the

newspaper into strips and dropping them into the chest.

Already understanding, Helen stepped closer to the chest and looked down into it. It was no longer empty, but nearly half-filled with newspaper. The strips Julian had so industriously shredded lay like a packing over and around the central bundle, something which had been wrapped in sheets of yesterday's paper. All the paper Julian had found in the house had not been enough to make the interior of the chest an exact replica of the image he had seen, but it was quite enough to do the same job the second time. Only there was no smell now. It was too soon for that.

As Helen reached down into the chest for the bundle, Julian let out a loud noise of displeasure and stood up. It wasn't supposed to be taken out; it was supposed to be hidden away in the chest forever. He tried, futilely, to get the bundle away from his mother.

She held it up out of reach. It was still warm. Her hands shaking, Helen began to unwind the many layers of newspaper that Julian had wrapped around her baby.



Timothy Zahn ("Houseguest," January 1982) returns with a story about a brigade of Enforcers, elite, heavily armed policemen of the Starguard, and the one misfit among them...

The Peaceful Man

BY

TIMOTHY ZAHN

Bombshells come in small packages these days. I stared down at the orders in my hand, not believing what I saw, as my head filled with the sound of crumbling plans. "What is this, Colonel? I can't go to Falkwade. I'm due to ship out for the Academy on Friday."

Colonel Lleshi shrugged uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant Hillery, but my own orders were explicit: 'One Enforcer Brigade plus attached alien psychologist to be sent to Falkwade immediately.' I've pulled the Eighteenth Enforcers off R and R and scraped together enough men to bring them back up to combat strength, but you're all I've got in the way of psychologists. Besides, I know you've done some reading on the Falki natives. So you're at least familiar with the situation. Anyway, I've relayed your new orders back to Earth; if the

Academy wants to get you reassigned back to them, they've got a week to get word back here."

"They won't try. I'm not vitally needed there, and teaching positions are low on the priority list." I glowered at the orders. "What do they need me on Falkwade for, anyway? The contact team there is bound to have its own A1-psychs."

"I don't know," Lleshi said, "But except for the Enforcer security groups, the contact team is mainly civilian. Perhaps they need a psychologist with a military viewpoint."

"Oh, great. What's happened — the fighting broken into a full-scale brush war?" The very thought made my hands sweat.

"You're the scholar around here, Lieutenant," Lleshi said. I winced slightly. To him, I knew, the word "scholar" also implied passiveness, im-

practical theories, and lack of fighting spirit — the sort of things he considered most unmilitary. "A list of relevant computer files has been delivered to your quarters — everything we've got available on Falkwade and its natives can be dug out of there. Good thing you're already packed; I'm sure you'll be able to use the extra time. Dismissed."

And that was that — my whole life rotated ninety degrees for at least a year by the stroke of a stylus. Giving Lleshi my most deprecatory salute, I turned and left.

I didn't find out just how hard Lleshi had had to scramble to beef up the Eighteenth Enforcers until we assembled at the transport ship for pre-flight instructions and I got my first look at the roster. Fully a quarter of the eighty-four officers and men had been transplanted into the brigade to replace those lost in the fighting on Rhodes. That wasn't good; a combat unit, especially one that has been in actual warfare, builds up a hefty camaraderie, and newcomers invariably meet with suspicion or even hostility. With my trained psychologist's eye, I could pick out the new men just by looking at them; their uneasiness was very apparent. I hoped the two-week trip to Falkwade would be long enough for them to be integrated into the group.

Major Tait Eldjarn's preflight talk was nicely designed to ease the fears of men just recently returned from com-

bat. He emphasized the primitive state of Falki culture and weaponry and the fact that the village where they would be stationed was safe from attack. He wound up with a flourish of optimistic platitudes and called for questions.

For a moment there was silence. Then one of the men in the first rank raised his hand. "Corporal Saiko, sir," he said in a heavily accented voice. "I have one, sir."

I'd noticed Saiko right away, of course. On an absolute scale he wasn't particularly small — a little shorter than average height, perhaps, with a slender build — but against the more massive physiques of the rest of the brigade, he seemed almost childlike. His smooth, Oriental face also stood out of the crowd, its lack of racial mix marking him as an Earthman. He was clearly a newcomer, and I could tell the others hadn't quite figured him out yet.

Eldjarn nodded. "Go ahead, Corporal."

"Sir, has anyone tried to negotiate with the Falkwade natives, to find out why they object to our presence?"

Eldjarn blinked in surprise at Saiko's question but recovered quickly. "Not all the Falkren are against us," he said. "The females, who control the villages, accept both the contact team and the mineral exploration groups as friends."

From what I'd read, the Falki females were closer to neutral on the subject, but I didn't say anything. Eldjarn went on: "It's only the neuters out

in the hills and woodlands who are trying to kick up a guerrilla war."

"Yes, sir, but has anyone tried talking with *them*?" Saiko persisted.
"There may be no need to fight."

In the silence that followed, someone snickered, and I could see both disgust and amusement flicker across the Enforcers' faces. Eldjarn kept his own expression neutral. "We're Enforcers; we fight. Talking is for the feeble and the diplomats. Any other questions, Corporal?"

"No, sir." Saiko's face didn't change, but I felt a stab of pain for him. Enforcers were not noted for sensitivity or compassion, and I knew Saiko would be the butt of some very low humor all the way to Falkwade.

"All right, then," Eldjarn said. "Eighteenth Enforcers: prepare to board."

I wasn't wrong. Before we were even off the ground, Saiko had been given his first Enforcer nickname: *Love-and-kisses*.

Enforcers, the elite policemen of the Stanguard, like to keep in fighting trim, and our transport had been furnished with this in mind. One of the cargo holds was equipped as a gym/combat room; another boasted a simuholographic shooting range where one could hone one's marksmanship without putting needle dents in any bulkheads. Other training and practice equipment was distributed around the passenger areas.

None of this was of any personal interest to me. So I stayed pretty much in my quarters, reading and working from the mountain of material I'd brought with me. It wasn't until the fourth day of the trip that I had my first visitor.

It was Saiko. "Excuse me, Lieutenant Hillery," he said, standing at the door. "I wonder if I might talk to you for a moment."

"Sure, Saiko, come on in." I waited until he was seated before continuing. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, sir. I wanted to ask you a few questions about the Falkren, if I may."

I covered my surprise; I'd expected him to want help on personal problems. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Well, sir, I've read the material we were provided, and it seems to have some inconsistencies in it. Are there three Falki sexes or just two?"

I nodded; I'd noted the inadequacy of the official handouts and was working hard to turn out a better set. "Good question, and it depends on how you look at it. While there are really just male and female Falkren, the males periodically undergo hormonal changes that leave them sexless. We call these *neuters*; and while they are, in a gross physiological sense, identical to the males, their emotional and social make-up is completely different. Whether or not they should count as a third gender is still being debated."

"I see," Saiko said slowly, "I think. But the reports said the males lived in the villages with the females. They only dislike humans in their neuter state?"

"How the males feel about us is really irrelevant because they're completely under the control of the females, who are tolerating us at the moment."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Okay." I hunched forward slightly in my chair, feeling my professorial side taking over. "Here's the Falki set-up. The females all live in the villages that are scattered over the major land masses. With them live the males, who handle all the heavy work — building, hauling, some farming — while the females have babies, do lighter work, and give all the orders. The males are completely subservient — as long as they're male. The minute they change to neuter — and the change apparently only takes minutes — they can't be ordered around any more by the females. They immediately leave the village and join up with the neuters who live in the surrounding area. We don't know the social structure of that group yet, but it's clear that they have one, because things get done. The neuters do all the hunting, fishing, lumbering — anything that needs to be done outside the village proper, delivering the goods to males at a rendezvous point near the village border and getting grain and clothing in return. If the village needs to move, the neuters blaze the trail and

act as a moving screen while the males and females travel. And, of course, they do any fighting that needs to be done."

"And when they go back to being male?"

"They return to the village."

Saiko stroked his lip thoughtfully. "Interesting. It makes sense to protect those who are breeding, both female and male, as much as possible. A most unusual expression of oneness, with this periodic changing of roles."

"You mean the way the females dominate the males but not the neuters? I suppose that does make for a certain symmetry."

He fixed me suddenly with a curious gaze. "Why do you insist on seeing it in terms of domination and submission? Couldn't it simply be that the Falkren recognize their interdependence and take the roles which allow their survival and growth?"

I floundered for a good five seconds on that one. "I suppose I'm anthropomorphizing," I said at last. "Most human societies run along power/authority lines. So I guess we have an automatic tendency to assume aliens behave that way, too."

"I see." There was an odd note of disappointment in Saiko's tone.

"You disagree?" I probed.

"Well ... I don't think that is the best way for even humans to look at the universe. It leads to unnecessary conflict."

He hesitated, unblinking eyes gauging my reaction. I knew that look and the thoughts behind it; my own rather nonmilitary personality had made me an oddball of sorts even among other Starguard scientists. The search for a kindred spirit could be a long and painful one. "Go ahead," I encouraged him.

"If I think in terms of dominance and submission, then I must consider myself as separate from the rest of the universe," Saiko said. "In other words, if I consider you to be outside of me, then I can try to dominate you. This sets up conflict between us.

"If instead I consider you to be actually another part of *me*, then I won't fight you, because we don't fight ourselves. I'll try to help you, try to let you have your way as much as is possible. You see? The conflict is now gone."

"Yes," I said carefully. I'd heard of that philosophy before. Oriental in origin, it was largely in the clutches of various mystical cults these days, at least out in the Colonies. "It's an interesting concept, but I think it's a bit risky. Humanity has certainly had more wars than we've needed, but it may be better sometimes to err on that side than to be too pacifist and get trampled. You see, with your philosophy there's very little you can do in the way of self-defense."

Saiko shrugged. "I could point out that an overly aggressive policy also has its dangers. What if you run into a

powerful force which you provoke to an unnecessary conflict, for example?"

"True," I admitted. "But at least you're ready for the war when it comes. If you're unable or unwilling to hit back, you won't survive." I could hardly believe I had wound up on this side of the argument. Saiko must be even less of a swashbuckler than I was, I decided.

"There *are* ways to defend yourself without injuring your opponent," Saiko said, smiling faintly.

"Sure — force fields. If you ever invent one let me know. incidentally, if you don't approve of combat, what are you doing in an Enforcer Brigade?"

"The Eighteenth needed another ordnance tech and I was available. On the other hand, where better to speak against conflict than where the conflict already exists?" His smile vanished and he grew serious. "Tell me, sir, *have* negotiations been tried with the Falkren?"

I waved at my computer terminal and the pile of hard-copy records beside it. "All the information I've got says we've tried talking with all three sexes. The males don't seem to count at all. The females are willing for the mineral exploration teams to poke around in exchange for the gifts we give them, but they have no authority outside the villages. The neuters have flatly refused to let us on their turf, and when armed teams go out anyway, they shoot crossbow bolts at them. Even using their best ambush and guer-

rika tactics, the casualties are running about twenty to one against them, but they still refuse to even discuss the issue. Although with the Falki social system as genetically based as it is, I'm not sure talk would help anyway."

"Perhaps it's a point of honor," Saiko murmured.

"Perhaps." Honor, I'd heard, was supposed to be important to the Oriental mind. I wondered if Saiko realized how dishonorable it looked to the other Enforcers for him to meekly accept the nickname they'd pinned on him.

Either Saiko was thinking along the same lines or something in my face tipped him off, and he gave me a half-smile. "Honor is an internal quality, Lieutenant. It doesn't rely on the perceptions of others." He stood up and saluted. "Thank you for your time, sir. I must leave now."

"I'm glad you stopped by, Saiko. Feel free to drop back any time."

"Yes, sir." Moving with quiet grace, he left the room.

Down deep, I sensed I'd just flunked a test — but, then again, he wasn't the kindred spirit I was seeking, either. Sighing, I got back to my work.

The incident in the Enforcers' mess happened two days later, and it was simple luck that put me there at the right time. I was looking for one of the noncoms and had dropped in on the chance he was having lunch. He wasn't

there, but as I turned to leave a bellow from across the room made me spin around. "Hey, Love-and-kisses!" a gravelly voice shouted. "You, Saiko! Get back here!"

Saiko, who had been carrying his tray toward an empty table, turned as a behemoth of a man rose a few paces behind him. I recognized the man instantly: Sergeant Cabral, universally known as Moose. And for good reason. "Yes?" Saiko said.

"You made me spill my drink on my tray," Moose accused.

Saiko shook his head. "I didn't touch you when I passed. It must have been someone else."

"Never mind the excuses. Get over here and clean it up. And then go get me another drink."

Saiko shook his head. "It was not my fault," he said, and turned to go.

Moose was reputed to have a short fuse even at the best of times — and this wasn't one of them. Saiko's blunt refusal was barely out of his mouth when Moose leaped across the intervening distance and caught Saiko's upper arm in a painful-looking grip. "Damn it, I said clean it up!" He yanked, pulling Saiko toward him—

And with a stupendous crash, Moose hit the floor two meters away.

The snickering which had started at Saiko's expense vanished like beer at a picnic, leaving the whole room in stunned silence. Moose rolled to his feet and turned back to face Saiko, his face a dangerous shade of red. "Damn

you," he said softly. "You're gonna regret that." And then he charged.

Saiko set down his tray, which had by some miracle survived the first clash, and waited. Moose launched a punch that should have sent Saiko across the room; instead, the smaller man leaned aside, caught the arm and spun around ... and, somehow, Moose was again on the floor.

Saiko stood aside and waited ... and Moose proceeded to prove his nickname didn't just refer to his size. He got up and tried again, this time throwing two fast savate kicks and a punch in rapid succession. Saiko evaded both kicks and again caught the punching fist. With a brief intertwining of arms, Moose again hit the deck. This time Saiko went down into a crouch next to him; and, though the tables blocked my view, I could hear Moose swearing and struggling to get up.

Just about then I suddenly broke out of my fascinated paralysis. "Ten-HUT!" I shouted.

There was a loud scramble of chairs as all the Enforcers shot to their feet. The two combatants were a second behind the others and I beckoned them forward. Moose, I noted, was panting somewhat and massaging his right wrist, but was otherwise unmarked. Saiko wasn't even breathing hard.

Technically, I wasn't in the brigade's chain of command. So, short of squealing on them to Major Eldjarn, there was little I could do in way of

punishment. So I gave them both a stern warning about saving their strength for the Falkren, told Saiko to report to my quarters later, and let everyone go back to lunch.

Saiko showed up half an hour later. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"At ease, Saiko, and have a seat."

He did so. "Sir, I must apologize for my part in the fight—"

"Forget it. He deserved what he got. But I wanted to ask you — what the blazes were you using on him?"

"It's called *Aikido*, sir. It's an ancient Japanese martial art which uses an opponent's strength and movements against him."

"Like jujitsu?" I knew that Enforcer training included a smattering of that.

"In some ways. *Aikido* is—" he hesitated — "gentler, I suppose. We don't attempt to block an attack with our own strength, but to evade the blow, allowing it to continue and then joining with the movement and redirecting it. An *Aikidoka*, you see, seeks to subdue his opponent without harming him. Most other martial arts, including jujitsu, strive to defeat the opponent with more forceful and potentially damaging methods."

A memory clicked. "Is *Aikido* what you meant when you talked about defense without injury?"

He nodded. "As you pointed out, sir, the philosophy of peace and oneness would quickly die out if its followers could not protect themselves. It is said that a master of *Aikido* is un-

touchable, no matter how many men attack him."

"Are you a master?"

Saiko dropped his gaze to the floor and smiled faintly. "I have studied the art for seventeen years. The founder of Aikido, Morihei Uyeshiba, spent over forty years in practice and always considered himself merely a student."

The legendary Oriental patience, I thought wryly — something modern man could use a lot more of. A little less hurried impatience might save us a lot of fighting on worlds like Falkwade. "I understand."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes. You can go now."

I saw Saiko off and on during the rest of the trip, though he never came to my quarters again to talk. He still seemed to have no real friends among the other Enforcers, but their general attitude was considerably more respectful toward him than it had been earlier. Enforcer nicknames, once given, tend to stick. So I noted with some amusement that "Love-and-kisses" Saiko was tacitly changed to the less obviously insulting "L.K." Saiko. It was a small step, but Saiko seemed satisfied.

We landed in groups of twelve, via shuttle, at the edge of the village where the contact team had set up shop two years ago. The landing pad was surrounded by an earthwork barrier manned by heavily armed Enforcers — for protection, I was told, against sniping

from the forest that pressed against the village on two sides. Apparently the village itself was off-limits for attack, but the neuters considered the pad itself fair game.

Major Eldjarn and I were in the first shuttle down and were driven immediately to the contact team's prefab, looking out of place among the interwoven-branch huts of the village's four hundred-odd Falkren and the seventy humans who now resided here. Several of the natives — each one the size of Moose Cabral and reasonably human-looking — could be seen working at various tasks.

"I'm glad to have you here," Colonel David Sherwood, the contact team's commander, said when the military formalities were out of the way. "We've lost four men in the past two days alone, all but one from villages down the coast. Fresh Enforcers should help morale a bit."

"I thought the villages were safe," Eldjarn said, frowning.

"The villages are, yes. But we can't sit around all day doing nothing. We send out an average of three survey teams a day via aircar. Almost the minute they land anywhere there are neuters running at them with those long knives of theirs and shooting those damn crossbows. It doesn't matter how far we are from here, either — the word seems to have gotten out to the whole planet. Even clans that usually fight each other are willing to join forces against us." Sherwood

shook his head. "We use scatterguns, exploders, and even heavy lasers on them, kill them by the dozens — and they still keep coming. Don't they understand that they can't beat us, that we have the whip hand on this planet?"

Saiko's words about dominance and conflict flashed briefly through my mind. "Perhaps they refuse to be dominated by us."

Eldjarn snorted. "How do you 'refuse' to be dominated?"

"By fighting back," I told him. "The neuters must know that you can't kill too many of them without losing whatever good will you have among the females."

"Lieutenant Hillery is right," Sherwood admitted. "Killing neuters is eventually equivalent to killing males, and the females won't put up with too much of that. We don't dare kill except in self-defense, and even that's dangerous. The neuters have both time and numbers on their side."

"Have you tried to find out why the neuters don't want us around?" I asked.

"They shoot at anyone who tries to go out and talk to them. About all we can do is talk to the males, try to get them to take truce offers out there when they change to neuter. So far it hasn't worked; we don't know why. Dr. Ariyoshi, our alien psychologist, suggested the memory of what we said to them might not survive the change. So we've been trying to catch one of them right after the change, before he

can leave the village, and drum in some instructions. So far they've gotten out too quickly for us. All of Ariyoshi's notes will be available to you — I hope you can make something out of them. The doctor himself chose this time to come down with some viral infection. He was flown off-planet last week for treatment." Sherwood seemed to consider it a personal insult that Ariyoshi had gotten sick. "Corporal Snyder outside will take you to Ariyoshi's hut; you might as well bunk there for now. Study the stuff he's done and work out some kind of plan to stop the neuter harassment of us. This has been going on for almost two years, and I'm getting tired of it. Results, Lieutenant — I want results."

"Yes, sir. I'll do what I can."

It took me nearly a week to go through the material Ariyoshi had collected — he hadn't organized it for someone else to use, and I had to do a lot of digging — and while it was interesting, I didn't get any brilliant ideas from it. For obvious reasons most of his studies covered only the males and females and their interrelationship. It was fascinating reading; humanity has few matriarchal cultures left, and none where the females so completely dominate the males. But little if any of it gave me any clues about even the basics of neuter psychology, let alone what sort of threats or inducements might stop their attacks. While

Ariyoshi had been convinced that a thread of consciousness ran through the male/neuter change, he'd been unable to determine how much memory or personality was transferred along this thread.

I was mulling over the problem one evening as I sat outside Ariyoshi's hut sipping a native drink that was reminiscent of strong limeade. In front of me was a small open area on the edge of the village where some of the male Falkren liked to relax after their day's labors. Fifty or so were here this particular evening, and the still air was full of both their scent and their quiet conversation. Only one other human was visible: Saiko, sitting cross-legged on the far side of the open space, was talking earnestly to a large male.

I watched with only mild interest. Saiko, I'd heard, was spending much of his off-duty time trying to sell his philosophy of oneness and peace to as many of the Falkren males as he could corner. To me it was obvious that he was trying to implant the teachings in the hope that they would survive through the change; to the rest of the Enforcers the whole idea of preaching peace to the peaceful was both amusing and demeaning, and once again Saiko was the butt of jokes and scorn. After what had looked like the first steps back toward peer acceptance on the transport, I was discouraged by this return to pariah status, especially since I saw little hope for his project. Most of the Falkren of this village understood

English by now, though they were not properly equipped to speak it, but Ariyoshi's notes made it clear that they were totally uninterested in anything human except for the gifts we gave them.

I suppose that if I'd been paying more attention I would have seen the change coming; certainly Ariyoshi's notes had described the syndrome in sufficient detail. As it was, I was as startled as Saiko when the Falki he was talking to abruptly scooped up a small stool and hurled it straight at the seated Enforcer.

Saiko's reflexes were excellent, but even so the stool caught his left arm as he threw himself to the right. He was on his feet in another second, just in time to catch the — now — neuter Falki's lunge. Ducking under the first swinging arm, he caught the other arm, twisted — and was hurled to the ground.

I gaped, and even as I jumped to my feet and yanked my scattergun from its holster, I understood what had happened. Saiko's Aikido tricks were designed for human anatomy. Falki muscles, joints, and bodily dimensions were subtly different — enough so, clearly, that Aikido was useless against the natives. And Saiko wasn't wearing his scattergun. Cursing under my breath, I ran forward through the crowd of Falkren who were trying to get out of the way of the fighting. But by the time I had a clear shot it was too late. Saiko was back on his feet and the

neuter was grabbing for him — far too close for my mediocre marksmanship. By all the rules this shouldn't be happening at all; I was almost sure they were still in the village proper, where the neuters weren't supposed to fight us. But there were no females here to claim authority, or maybe the neuter knew better than I how the zigzag boundary really ran. Whatever the reason, Saiko was in big trouble, and he would have to take one more fall before I could help him.

The neuter caught Saiko's left arm and pulled him close. Saiko reached up with his right hand, dipped slightly and pivoted — and suddenly the neuter was bending forward at the waist, Saiko holding his arm at the wrist and elbow. The Falki roared and lashed backwards with a foot; Saiko let go and danced back out of the way. Spinning around, the neuter leaped again ... and this time he was the one who hit the ground. He jumped up, lunged, and was thrown, and I lowered my scattergun. Apparently, Saiko had figured out how to handle the Falki anatomy, and if he was performing with less than his usual grace, the results were no less impressive. All I had to do now was wait until the neuter had all the fight knocked out of him and Colonel Sherwood would have the freshly changed neuter he wanted.

It took another half-dozen throws before the Falki finally gave up. He lay on his back, his sides working like bellows, and stared up at Saiko. I step-

ped forward. "Good work, Saiko," I said. Shifting my attention to the neuter, I gestured with my scattergun. "Get up."

"What are you going to do with him, sir?" Saiko asked.

"The colonel wants to try giving a neuter some messages to take out to the others," I explained. "This is the first one we've been able to catch."

Saiko shook his head. "I don't think he'll sit still for it, sir. He'll fight if you try to hold him, and he'll either kill someone or be killed himself. It would be better to let him leave."

I looked at Saiko, then back down at the neuter. It was the kind of concern I would have expected from Saiko, but it also made a certain amount of sense. Already the Falki was breathing easier, and I doubted that anyone but Saiko could handle him without killing or maiming him — a fine messenger he'd make then. One more neuter out there wouldn't increase our danger noticeably ... and maybe some of Saiko's message of peace had gotten through. And, besides, there was one other possibility that had just occurred to me that made it a fair gamble. "All right," I said slowly. "He can go."

"Thank you, sir." To the alien: "Leave quickly, before others come."

His eyes on Saiko, the neuter carefully rose to his feet. For a moment he stared at the Enforcer ... and then he was moving into the growing darkness toward the forest.

From the village behind us a group of Enforcers ran up, weapons at the ready. "What's going on here?" their sergeant demanded.

I took a deep breath. "Come on, Saiko, let's go talk to the colonel."

Colonel Sherwood was absolutely furious.

"Damn it, Lieutenant, I should have you court-martialed," he stormed at me. "Letting that Falki go was tantamount to disobeying a direct order. More importantly, it may ultimately cost some of my men their lives."

I kept my eyes fixed directly ahead of me as the verbal flash flood swept around me. I dared not look to see how Saiko, at my side, was taking this. Fortunately — I suppose — most of the flak was directed at me.

Finally, Sherwood ran out of invective. "You have any explanation to give for your irresponsible behavior?" he growled.

"Yes, sir," I said in as calm a voice as I could manage. "It occurred to me that the Falkren neuters may not acknowledge our superiority because we use unfair weapons against them."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Excuse me, sir, but it does. Our weapons are not *us*; they're merely our tools. Since the Falki society is genetically based, the neuter pecking order is most likely determined by toolless attributes: strength or fighting ability, probably. If the neuters consider an

unarmed Falki superior to an unarmed human, they may refuse to submit to us even though *with* our weapons we can cut them to ribbons. This sort of thing has been seen before; in the natives of Bellias, for instance...."

I trailed off as Sherwood stalked to a bookshelf and returned with a labeled cassette. He held it up inches from my face. "Report for the week June 8 through 14," he identified it unnecessarily. "On Thursday of that Week an Enforcer karate expert named Sergeant Zawadowski caught and fought with a neuter just outside the village. In full sight of at least half a dozen neuter snipers he disarmed the Falki and beat him silly. The neuter had to undergo medical treatment in the village for almost a month before he could leave again. He currently seems to be in charge of the northern flank of snipers — our sentries spot him occasionally among the trees. The plastic arm cast we gave him is very distinctive." He tossed the cassette on his desk and glared at me. "Didn't Ariyoshi's notes refer to the incident?"

My mouth felt very dry, and my whole career flashed before my eyes. "I ... must have missed that," I managed.

"Really. Well, to make sure you have enough time to do your work properly, you're confined to quarters until further notice." The colonel shifted his glare to Saiko. "And for your part in this you're relieved of duty for one day."

"Yes, sir," Saiko said evenly.

"That's all; dismissed."

Ariyoshi's notes did indeed mention the incident, I discovered two hours later; the report covered half a page in a file I'd only skimmed. I felt like a fool — and not least because I'd let Saiko's philosophy of peace influence my decision. Restraint was fine in its place, but my career was on the line here, and I couldn't afford to be trigger-shy any more. I would get Sherwood the newly changed neuter he wanted, one way or another. If Saiko agreed to help, fine; if not, the neuter was going to get hurt. It was that simple.

The alarm klaxons went off just after dawn the next morning, jarring me out of deep sleep. Rolling out of bed, I pulled on my pants and boots and snatched up my tunic and gunbelt. The alarm had meanwhile changed tone and was giving out a steady *dot-dash-dash*: Morse for W. Ducking out the hut door, I took a quick glance around me and then headed west.

About half the off-duty personnel were already at the village perimeter when I arrived. Ahead of us was an astounding sight: a hundred meters away, standing just this side of the forest, was a line of armed neuters, crossbows lowered but ready. Picking their way across the small grain field between us and the forest were three figures: two neuters and a human.

Saiko.

Colonel Sherwood must have been

only seconds ahead of me, because one of the Enforcer sentries was still giving his explanation as I approached them.

"—just stood there as the other two came forward. That one — Saiko — has been coming out here before dawn the last few days — meditating, or something — and one of the neuters beckoned to him. He seemed to recognize the Falki, because suddenly he said 'he must have understood what I was telling him!' and handed me his scattergun. Before I realized what he was doing, he'd walked out there to meet them. Garcia hit the alarm about then. We couldn't shoot without hitting Saiko, and — well, the others haven't attacked us."

Sherwood nodded and filled his lungs. "Saiko!" he roared. "Get back here!"

Saiko stopped and turned, his escort doing like wise. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but this is too important. I think they must be willing to speak of peace with me."

"What? Why you?" Sherwood called, but Saiko had already turned his back and resumed walking.

I stepped to the colonel's side. "He believes all life in the universe is interrelated and should try to be at peace with itself," I explained. "He's apparently been talking to the village males about it; one of those walking with him looks like the male that changed yesterday. Maybe you should let him go to them."

"Like hell! I'm not going to sit here

and let one of my men be kidnapped — even a mystical idiot." Sherwood glanced around him. "Garcia, Daniels — go out there and bring him back."

Two Enforcers started forward — and the crossbows abruptly came up.

I wasn't the first to see it, but I was the first to say something. "Hold it!" I snapped. "Back off. Carefully."

The two men took a step backwards, and once again the neuters lowered their weapons. Sherwood turned to me, glowering. Strangely enough, he wasn't angry at my commanding of his orders. "So that's how it is, eh? They want Saiko, and only him — and are ready to start something that'll get them slaughtered if we try anything else."

"You can't open fire, Colonel," Major Edjarn, standing on Sherwood's other side, said. "I count a hundred twenty-nine neuters out there — that's nearly the village's entire complement. The females would go crazy if we killed all of them."

"I know that!" Sherwood snapped. "Hamedon! Call the pad and have them send up a spotter car. I want Saiko tracked if they take him into the forest."

"Corporal Saiko can take care of himself," Eldjarn murmured. I silently seconded him; nevertheless, my heart was pounding by the time Saiko reached the forest.

I had already noticed that the line of neuters resembled a flattened normal curve; that is, the Falkren on the two

ends were the smallest, with the sizes increasing toward the center, where the largest Falki I had ever seen was standing. It was to this neuter that Saiko was led. The neuter stepped forward as the two escorting Falkren moved off to either side, returning to what were evidently their places in the line. Saiko bowed to the large neuter, and through the dead silence that had descended I could just hear his words: "I greet you, honorable sir—"

The neuter handed his crossbow to the Falki next to him and charged.

Saiko had already seen one Falki surprise attack, and he was a lot nimbler when not sitting down. He fell to his right, rolling on a curved but rigid arm back to his feet, easily evading the attack.

"Please stop," he said, his voice controlled but showing signs of agitation. "There is no reason for fighting."

The Falki charged again; again Saiko dodged, still trying to talk peace to his opponent. I expected the Falki to try another charge, but he apparently was out of patience. He bellowed something in his own language, and the next three largest neuters handed off their weapons and stepped forward.

All around me was the soft sound of cloth on flesh as scatterguns were raised. I wasn't aware I'd drawn my own weapon until Colonel Sherwood's hand grasped my arm, forcing the muzzle down. "Hold your fire," he

ordered, frigidly calm. "We still can't shoot them."

The four neuters formed a box around Saiko, who had given up talking and now waited silently in an agile-looking stance. At some unseen signal, his attackers moved forward.

Saiko moved, too, stepping away from the center of the square so that the Falkren would not all reach him at the same time. The closest neuter swung at his head; Saiko grabbed the arm, pivoted in a circle, and dropped the Falki on his back. Two others reached him simultaneously; Saiko pushed one into the other and took advantage of their momentary entanglement to sent the fourth attacker flying. By then the first Falki was back in the fray....

Sherwood was muttering something incredulous under his breath. Even I, who'd seen Saiko in action twice before, was impressed — I hadn't expected Aikido to be useful against more than one opponent at a time. The fight went on and on ... and, suddenly, the largest Falki bellowed something.

The other attackers froze. Slowly, they straightened or got to their feet and returned to their places in line. The big one stood facing Saiko in silence for a moment; then he, too, returned to the line. As if on signal, the neuters all turned and disappeared back into the forest.

Saiko watched them go. Then he started back toward the village, a puz-

zled and worried expression on his face.

Colonel Sherwood turned to me. "All right, lieutenant, what was *that* all about?"

A growing suspicion was gnawing at me. "I'm not sure, sir," I said. "But I've got an idea. I suggest you send a patrol into the forest in — oh, say an hour or so, with instructions *not* to shoot unless in extreme danger. If they aren't attacked, I think we may have the solution to the neuter trouble for you."

Sherwood gave me a long, measuring look. "Daniels! I want six men ready for patrol duty in one hour."

The patrol was not attacked.

Ihe twelve-passenger shuttle was a speck in the blue Falkwade sky. "One more and then it's our turn," Major Eldjarn remarked, shading his eyes as he watched for one of the other two shuttles to appear. "I still can't believe it. A week ago the neuters were trying to kill anyone who stepped outside the village, and now they're so cooperative Colonel Sherwood doesn't even need us any more. Here comes the shuttle." He lowered his gaze to me. "Are you going to loosen up and tell my why they changed?"

"Didn't the colonel explain it?" I asked, somewhat mechanically; my thoughts were elsewhere.

"No. He said he doesn't like repeating someone else's theories until he's

willing to believe them himself. And Saiko's been even less talkative than usual lately; he won't talk about it at all."

"That's because he understands what's happened." And is blaming himself for it, I added silently.

"Great. So how about letting me in on the joke?"

I sighed. "It's anything but a joke, sir. You remember that I suggested the neuters might be refusing to acknowledge our superiority over them? I was right. Shooting them simply brought out their own combat instincts; they saw us as just another kind of threat to be resisted, the same way neuters have fought threats to their villages for millennia.

"And then Saiko came along. He fought one of the neuters, who went and told the others, and Saiko was invited to what amounted to a showdown with the chief neuter."

"And Saiko won," Eldjarn nodded.

"But we've been winning fights against the neuters for two years. Was it because Saiko was so much smaller than they were?"

"Not at all. But Saiko was using Aikido, a nondestructive form of combat. He didn't tear them up with shotgun fire or break bones with karate kicks. He defeated them *without hurting them.*"

"So?"

"Don't you see? Dominance *without injury* is precisely the relationship of the females to the males in a Falki village. As males they have to submit to that; apparently they have to do so as neuters, too, if someone is able to take the proper role."

Eldjarn was looking bewildered. "You mean they think we're females?"

"No, of course not. But the *pattern* is the same, and patterns are very important in genetically governed behavior. In this case the pattern is even stronger because it's reinforced every

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time the neuter changes back to male — he doesn't outgrow or discard it at any point in life. Saiko's triggered whatever instinct or state of mind goes with the pattern, and I don't think the neuters have any real choice in their response. As long as no one shoots at them again, they should remain submissive to us."

That last, at least, Eldjarn understood completely. "Well, that's great. Soon as we can get some more of these martial-arts guys in to show their stuff at some of the other villages, we should have all the territory we need to work with." He chuckled. "It's fitting, you know, that it should be old Love-and-kisses Saiko who wound up finally bringing peace to the planet."

"Yes," I said shortly and turned away. It was no use trying to explain Saiko's feelings to Eldjarn; his dominance-oriented military mind would find Saiko even more incomprehensible than the Falkren. He wouldn't

understand that Saiko's goal was peace with dignity and honor for all sides, not the peace of complete capitulation. He wouldn't understand the shame Saiko felt at having used his "gentle" martial art — however unknowingly — to provide a beachhead for human domination over a planetful of intelligent beings. And he would never understand what disgrace and loss of face could mean to Saiko's sense of honor.

And yet, despite all this, Saiko's philosophy of peace remained unshaken. I had talked to him often this past week, and through all his pain I had never seen even a glimpse of cynicism or despair or of disbelief in the path he had chosen. A philosophy that strong, it seemed to me, was worth careful study — and my interest was not purely on a professional level. Tomorrow morning, at 0600 sharp, Saiko is going to give me my first training in Aikido.

I am looking forward to it.

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Films

BAIRD SEARLES



CAR BASH DOWN UNDER

About the lowest form of cinema, along with geek films and snuff films, is the car bash movie, the sort on which, for instance, Burt Reynolds has based a career. This is built on that cliche of the contemporary film and TV scene, the car chase, and extends it to totalling as many vehicles as possible. Why there is such a deep-seated need in the current population to see this done over and over again is beyond my comprehension; I think I'd rather not know.

The car bash film has combined with science fiction before, a hybrid I have studiously avoided in this space. But I thought that I should give *The Road Warrior* a chance, for one reason. It's from Australia, and if you haven't been keeping up on the current cinema scene, Australian films have been causing something of a stir, and I've found examples as divergent as *The Last Wave* and the TV mini-series *A Town Like Alice* more than routinely interesting.

The Road Warrior is a sequel to *Mad Max* of a couple of years ago, which I did not see. In a brief prologue to the new one, it is established that there has been a nuclear holocaust and in the anarchy following, Max, an ordinary young Australian bloke, sees his wife brutally killed. He becomes a loner, surviving by scavenging the precious fuel that keeps any operable vehicles going.

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

In *The Road Warrior*, Max is involved by circumstance with a group in possession of a tank load of fuel, way the hell and gone in a refinery enclave surrounded by nothing.

Well, not quite nothing, since they are under siege by a horde of neo-barbarians, predictably punk — Mohawks, motorcycles, etc. — who are Not Nice At All. It ends with Max driving the tanker down the longest, straightest road I have ever seen, with the horde in full pursuit, boarding, bashing and crashing. This may be the ultimate car bash chase — not being an aficionado I'm not sure, but I can't imagine one that goes on longer (it takes an appreciable percentage of the movies' running time) or is fuller of incident.

I am absolutely astonished to be able to say that this routine material has been transmuted by some sort of antipodal alchemy into a movie that does not insult the intelligence and has more than a little to offer. It has been made with style and intelligence (which are in notably short supply with American filmmakers, especially of this sort of film).

There are numerous inventive touches, such as the mute, feral child (sex totally indeterminate) that attaches itself to Max and is about the uncutest kid ever to appear on screen. There is the Achilles and Patroclus pair of motorcyclists, the death of one of whom raises the tension several notches. And there is the snake-handling

"captain" of a most ramshackle auto-gyro that resembles an umbrella found in a trashcan more than anything else.

Much of the photography is beautiful, such as some stunning long shots of the enclave approached by the horde and its many and varied vehicles, raising great plumes of dust; the explosion that destroys it is something spectacular.

The production design — costumes, in particular — is both imaginative and right, and while there is violence to spare, there is not the all-American dwelling on gratuitous gore, which proves that civilized sensibility still exists down under.

And finally, the actors are just fine. Mel Gibson as Max is heroically masculine without the near parodic machismo so many American actors tend to push. Emil Minty as the child is little short of amazing, and Bruce Spence as the gyro captain is a wonderful wimp without being a cartoon.

In short, my hat is off to the Aussies. Anybody that can make a car bash movie with this much class has to be a force to reckon with in the future of the medium.

The Bardathon continues on PBS as all of Shakespeare's plays are newly produced for TV. Since the only one I'd really liked so far was one of the two major fantasies, *The Tempest*, I had some hopes for the other, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They were not fulfilled, I'm sorry to say.

The ingredient absolutely essential to any production of this play is magic — which can be accomplished in all sorts of ways. That weird Hollywood concoction of the 30s with James Cagney and Mickey Rooney had it. The famous Peter Brook stage version had it, trapezes and all. The off-Broadway production designed by Jim Dine had a lot of it (the Oberon was a cloak with no one in it). And above all, the fabulous Czech puppet version of Jiri Trnka had it even without much of the dialogue.

This new one didn't have an ounce of magic. It was done, as producer Jonathan Miller carefully explained to us, as a return to "traditional Romantic realism" which meant galumphing kidies as the fairy band, a Bottom who was not the top (looking like the White

Rabbit wandered in from *Alice*), and a Titania and Oberon who were just plain folks, she in a white shift, he in trousers and jerkin.

The biggest visual effect was Oberon's entrance on a horse; given the general tedium of the rest of the production, this seemed like some sort of achievement.

Videowares dept... A major release on videocassette — *THX-1138*. If you haven't seen George Lucas's first commercial film, rent it immediately. It's very different from *Star Wars*, but as perfect in its way — more or less the definitive word on the rebel in a repressive, anti-individualistic society of the future. If you have seen it, rent it immediately anyhow. It took me several viewings to get all that was there.

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*Richard Mueller wrote "The Chains of the Sea," June 1982.
His new story is a dazzling, if not entirely serious extrapolation of lycanthropy...*

Everybody Goes To Mosserman's

BY

RICHARD MUELLER



Mrs. Mosserman yawned, stretched to take a kink out of his shoulder, and threw the journal down on his desk. It slid neatly across the desk top and filed itself in the waste basket. Considering the amount of information it had given him, he decided to leave it there.

Mrs. Gutridge's G.I. troubles were psychosomatic, he was convinced of it, but he owed it to her, and her willingness to submit to batteries of expensive tests, to keep looking. Perhaps a new disease; some tiny microbacillus transmitted only on large-denomination bills, a rare parasite inhabiting the upholstery of chauffeured Mercedes Benz saloons or perhaps the deep-pile carpeting of Lear jet lounges. Bits of her money will become bits of my money, he thought. I shall make her well and she shall keep me eating.

The logic was flawless, if a bit strained. Mosserman did not appear to

have ever missed a meal in his life. My frame is large, he thought to himself, when he took time to consider it at all. My stature, my carriage, my presence is opulent. I cut a wide swath through the world.

Mrs. Gutridge had taken two hours with her latest complaint, 'a falling feeling in my colon', as she described it. He had clucked and scolded, agonized, upbraided and sugared her, given her a new placebo and sent her home. It was like a Sig Ruhmann-Margaret Dumont scene from a Marx Brothers movie, and at the end he had glanced at his framed copy of the Hippocratic oath and felt a bit soiled, but, he reminded himself, the dirt was green — money-green. A few more customers like her, and he could retire to some nice tropical clinic in Aruba and rub puffy shoulders with rich tourists. He punched the intercom.

"Bender."

"Yas, Doctuh," came Miss Bender's New York nasal drawl. Miss Bender had come out from the Bronx to break into Show Business, which she always described in capital letters. Why she hadn't gone three miles to Manhattan instead of 3000 miles to Sherman Oaks was a constant source of wonder and regret to Stanley Mosserman, but he stuck with her. Miss Bender's brother, Morris, was a key grip with Paramount and was Mosserman's connection to feed his addiction to movie memorabilia. He had liberated prints, scripts, stills, props, bits of clothing, lobby cards and posters for Mosserman, and when the time came to return the favor, Mosserman could hardly refuse. So far, Janet — Miss Bender — had been out here for three years and had not yet been discovered, but she had high hopes. She'd taken to having her lunches at a new organic diner in Studio City, and twice she'd spoken to Jim Hampton. Mosserman was pulling for her.

"How many more patients this afternoon?"

He was hoping to get out to Venice in time for an early showing of "It Happened One Night," then a late supper at The Old Spaghetti Factory and drinks at the Bonaventure with Dr. Prudhoe, Mrs. Gutridge's analyst. Comparing notes on the old lady's hypochondriacal imagination over glasses of sherry while watching the lights of the city rotate slowly below

them was a fine end to any day.

"Jus two moah, Doctuh," Miss Bender whined. "A Mistuh Strickland an a Mistuh Biddle...."

"Bi-DELL," came a masculine voice.

"Mistuh Bidell. They're togethuh."

Just what he needed; a rich Silverlake homosexual couple to get a few discreet jabs of penicillin, plus a suitably priced, very hip yet fatherly lecture on sexual excess. He gazed longingly on the gilt-framed picture of Humphrey Bogart and Peter Lorre on his desk, the picture a gift from Morris, the frame a birthday gift from his mother. He'd taken her picture out.

"Rick, Rick, hide me, Rick!"

"I stick my neck out for no one."

Right on.

He revised his estimate of the business at hand as soon as the two came into his inner sanctum, looking about apprehensively. Definitely not queens, screaming or otherwise. Perhaps an industrial-safety complaint. He put his hand into his pocket to fish out one of his brother's business cards, criminal negligence our specialty, but the taller of the two misinterpreted his action and stepped forward.

"Oh, please, don't get up..."

"I am up."

"...not on our...account."

The two looked at each other, then at Mosserman. He beckoned them to chairs, then seated himself.

"Now then, which of you is Mr. Strickland?"

The taller man was Strickland, and, while Mr. Biddle (Bi-DELL) seemed to relax at once, Strickland appeared to have been on edge and spent the last thirty-odd years cultivating the habit. Not a Don Knotts nervousness but an underlying jumpy quality, as if he was not used to being around people. Yes, that's it, Mosserman amended. He's nervous over the situation. Diagnosis, the tools of the healer. Observe, identify, review, revise. The warm glow of his own professional competency infused him.

Strickland was thin, with a comical face, and he somewhat resembled one of those British actors that frequented the "Carry On" comedies that Cal Worthington had taken to showing off late. Biddle, obviously the shy man's amanuensis, was rotund and vital, with dark curly hair and pudgy fingers that worked incessantly. It was Biddle who responded to Mosserman's standard 'now what seems to be the trouble?' opening.

"First of all," Biddle began, "you must know that Strickland and I are brothers."

"Yes, and we work and live together. I have a moderately successful pharmaceutical concern in Van Nuys, perhaps you've heard of it?"

Biddle Pharmaceuticals was not Park Lilly, but the money light was certainly aglow in Mosserman's mental强室. He nodded intently.

"Well, we're not Johnson and Johnson, but I can tell that you've heard of

us. We do reasonably well through our policy of not merely replicating standard formulas and mixtures, but actively seeking new ways to bring the wonders of natural science — and here I must emphasize natural — to aid modern man. As much as possible, the drugs we produce are made from time-tested and time-honored recipes, so far as we are able to discover them. With me so far?"

Mosserman nodded.

"That's it in a nutshell. We use the same herbal remedies that the primitive peoples, ha-ha, have been using for centuries. You might remember that we were the first to discover that derivatives of curare could be used to relieve sunburn."

"Too expensive," Strickland said mournfully, shaking his head.

"You win some..."

"...you lose some," Mosserman finished, getting the sinking feeling that these two were trying to sell him something, but Biddle winked and fluttered his hands.

"Now, you're probably saying to yourself that these two are trying to sell me something, but I assure you this isn't so. We have a genuine medical problem, and you, sir, come highly recommended."

"May I asked by whom?"

"My brother is a patient of Franz Prudhoe, the eminent psychologist." From whom I get all my hypochondriacs, thought Mosserman. This could be lucrative.

"It's your brother's problem then?"

"No, it's mine also, and I have a feeling that it may not stop there."

"Oh?"

"Doc, how much do you know about lycanthropy?"

Fighting down a prickly feeling of unease, Mosserman eagerly bade Biddle to continue.

Biddle explained that, while he ran the firm and did most of the experimental lab work himself, his brother, a basically high-strung and antisocial individual who hated the Los Angeles area, was in charge of field investigations. Strickland combed the mountains and jungles of the world for new remedies, and, so far, he had been remarkably successful, and the firm had prospered.

About eight months ago, Strickland had been up the Amazon at Manaus, closing a deal for a regular supply of curare with representatives of the Jibaros. Strickland's weird personality, a detriment among the trappings and attitudes of civilization, seemed to flower to the fullest among primitives. Under the veneer of nerves was a forceful and dynamic Strickland, lurking among the coiled roots of his subconscious, a Strickland who could sit down in any clearing in Brazil or New Guinea or Katanga under the spears of the tribe, and win the hearts and minds of people who would butcher Biddle or Mosserman on sight. To

Biddle's mind, his brother was a true genius of the bush. Mosserman looked at Strickland, who was chewing nervously on his tie, and was not so sure.

As Strickland moved among the bazaars, godowns, huts or whatever they had in Manaus, shaking hands with the Indians and passing out tobacco, he heard a strange story. The story concerned a tribe upriver of the Jibaros called the Xploc (pronounced Ziploc) Indians, who grew a strange flower with truly magical properties. When Strickland inquired into the nature of the properties, his Jibaro stringer replied that it gave the Indians whatever they wanted. Need to hunt? Flower make you a tiger. Need to fish? Flower make you a crocodile. Need to fly? Flower make you a bird.

Naturally Strickland, his curiosity aroused and possessed of an excess of courage and true grit (and, Mosserman reasoned, more than a little stupidity), started upriver immediately for Xploc land. The journey was difficult, and he had to contend with everything from the dreaded marabunta to minor, expected problems, such as piranhas, jaguars and snakes. Finally, months later and alone, he stumbled into the village of the Xplocs, a people who were systematically given to murdering anyone they encountered within their tribal areas, and, naturally, they immediately made Strickland a member, according him demigod status due to his white skin. Jon Hall never had it that good.

As a visiting fireman and B.M.O.C., Strickland was invited to watch as the natives imbibed the juices of a strange plant with orange flowers which grew everywhere about the village in abundance. The native elders said that the standard way of dealing with the plant (which had an unpronounceable name consisting solely of consonants but which Strickland insisted on calling "Weeping Charlie," which was fine with the natives who hadn't the slightest idea what the tall, goofy god was talking about) was to pulverize its calyx and mix the juice with native beer. However, during the spring, the little devils also put out copious amounts of pollen which did the trick on everything within a hundred miles possessed of lungs. When Strickland tried to get the elders to be more specific, they just winked, stuck out their long tongues and drooled knowingly.

Biddle paused in the telling as Strickland imitated, in a precisely disturbing way, the gesture that the elders had made. He looked a bit like Harpo Marx. Mosserman, thoroughly interested, urged him to continue.

As the ceremony progressed, getting wilder and wilder with all manner of native excesses going on, an amazing thing happened. The natives who had taken the juice of the Weeping Charlie turned, one at a time and right before Strickland's amazed eyes, into totem animals and slithered, padded or flew away. Strickland, who had been

careful not to imbibe anything before the ceremony, swore that he could not have been hallucinating, and, at any event, the native elders seemed quite satisfied. On the morning of the following day, Strickland talked the natives into giving him a packet of Weeping Charlie seeds (easily done for a god) and, with an escort of a bushboar, a jaguar and a crocodile, started off downriver, arriving in Manaus three months later, from whence he connected by air, arriving home in Van Nuys last fall.

On request, Mosserman had Miss Bender bring everyone coffee and then told her that she could close up for the night, his Clark Gable movie completely forgotten. Biddle, weary at the telling of so emotional a story, sipped his coffee quietly. Strickland was asleep in his chair.

Having seen all of the Wolfman films many times, Mosserman had no trouble dealing with the concept of lycanthropy or, for that matter, with the powers of native drugs, but he was frankly sceptical of such a wild tale as Biddle had just related. Was this some elaborate Freudian practical joke of Prudhoe's? Or perhaps a con game? On the pretext of thoughtful pacing, at which his magnificent carriage was particularly impressive, he stopped at his bookcase and examined an article in a two-year-old A.M.A. Journal dealing with the curative powers of snail extracts. The author was Leon Biddle, Ph.D. and the picture matched the

pudgy little man sitting at his desk. It was real!

The opportunities in such a discovery were staggering. He had to find some way to get in on this before it broke. If it was truly genuine, it could be marketed as everything from a cancer cure to the ultimate beauty aid. The hell with a clinic in Aruba, he could buy the whole damn island, not to mention all the movie memorabilia he would ever want. And he could kiss off Morris and fire Miss Bender. Mosserman had found his money tree.

But, they said they'd come here with a problem.

"So how may I help you?"

Biddle glanced at Strickland, to see if he was still sleeping.

"He gets easily excited when he's in the city."

"I understand, go on."

"Well, sir, by Christmas we had an entire greenhouse of Weeping Charlie growing out in Van Nuys, and any fears I had had of the inability of the things to flourish outside of their native soil and climate seemed groundless. We were gearing up to do a full-scale research effort on the plants after the first of the year, and things really couldn't have been better.

"On New Year's Eve, not being party people, we stayed home and watched television and consumed a good amount of beer. Brazilian beer it was. Strickland developed a taste for it in Manaus and has the stuff shipped here by the case. He has few indulgences

and, believe me, sir, we can afford it.

"At any rate, we had tapped into an Abbott and Costello film festival on New Year's Eve, and after about the third film, and feeling quite giddy, we did something very foolish. Very, very foolish."

"You sampled the flower," Mosserman said eagerly, sitting on the edge of his chair.

"What?" Strickland cried, popping awake, then subsiding into a dazed silence.

"There, there," Biddle soothed, then turned back to Mosserman and nodded.

"Yessir, we sampled the flowers. After all, we were fairly drunk and tanked up on Dutch courage, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. I mean, let's bring in the New Year with molecular transformation, that sort of thing. Then we staggered upstairs and watched the last of the movies, the one where they're draftees."

"Buck Privates," Mosserman responded automatically.

"Correct."

"And what happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing," Mosserman repeated softly. "That's terrible."

"Well," Biddle equivocated, "not exactly. I thought that the plants had failed. Something in the soil or the water or the simulated Amazonian conditions we'd set up wasn't right."

They had no potency. I wanted, I confess, to uproot the plants right then and there, but Strickland talked me into relenting, to give them time to mature. Perhaps potency would come with age.

"Well, it was about three weeks later, on the night of the full moon, that I noticed something strange. I felt different. I had fallen asleep after dinner, as is my habit, and when I awoke, things did not seem right somehow. I had the urge to get into mischief, to simply go out and see what kind of hell I could raise. Very akin to the way I used to act as a child around Halloween. And that is not like me. I'm normally sedate, urbane, you might say. I was not at all myself. I determined to clear my head and I wandered into the downstairs bathroom, looking to use my mouthwash. Strickland was already in the bathroom, but it was not Strickland."

"Who was it?"

"It was a tall, dapper fellow with slicked hair and a small mustache. He turned to me and said, in utter bewilderment, 'Lou.' I ran to the mirror, knowing what I would find, and there it was. We had changed into Abbott and Costello."

Mosserman looked at them for a long moment, out from under glowering eyebrows, then said softly, "Get out of my office."

Biddle was on his feet.

"Sir, we came for your help. Prudhoe recommended you but he doesn't know the whole story. You're the first person we confided in. Hear me out."

Mosserman was furious but Biddle looked so sincere, bobbing up and down in the center of his carpet. And he was rich, very rich, if the pharmaceutical grapevine was accurate. He relented.

"Go on."

"Thank you, Doctor. You won't regret this."

"How long did the effect last?"

"By morning it was gone but, believe me, we spent an anxious night, wondering if the change was permanent. We're long-time Abbot and Costello fans, but liking them is a long distance from becoming them. We didn't even go through 'Who's on first?' — something we often turn to for amusement in the evenings."

Mosserman was growing impatient again. "But if the change wasn't permanent, what's the problem?"

"It came back."

"Oh?"

"Yes, on the next full moon it caught us early, driving home on the freeway, and this time, I confess, I began to enjoy it. That night we must have done hours of their material, but the next day neither of us could go down to the plant because we were still Abbott and Costello. We hadn't changed back. It's been the same every full

moon since. The duration has been increasing at a constant rate of six hours per month. Last full moon the transformation lasted a full twenty-four hours."

Mosserman's head jerked up with the full implication of this. 'That means, that if it goes on increasing at its present rate...."

"If it goes on increasing at the present rate, in somewhat over eight years, the change should be permanent."

The entire encounter had disturbed Mosserman so much that his evening had been ruined. After agreeing that the two might come visit him again when the moon was full to prove their allegations, and eliciting a promise that they would lock up their greenhouse until the three of them could decide some reasonable course of action, Mosserman had sent them off and spent the evening in his massive bed, looking through Richard Anobile's "Who's on First?"

There could be a use for this thing if it could be controlled in some way. It could certainly become an interesting alternative to plastic surgery, though there could be problems with the police, presuming that the fingerprints also changed. And what of those people who did turn into animals, or worse, plants? Weeping Charlie was more of a mixed blessing than splitting the atom.

He scanned through the book of

Abbott and Costello routines. Imagine having those two as your totem animals, he thought as he fell asleep to a series of nightmares in which he and Abbott and Costello were pursued through the Amazonian jungle by bushboars, jaguars and crocodiles, and every time he passed a pool of water it was too muddy for him to see who he had become.

It had been a slow day at the office, Mrs. Gutridge having been disposed of by three, and Mosserman spent a leisurely afternoon perusing the "Casablanca" photo script and watching a fly that had somehow gotten into the building's hermetically sealed structure. The fly was looking vainly for something to eat, probably tasted Miss Bender's coffee and found it wanting. At four he wandered into the outer office where Miss Bender was doing her nails for the fourteenth time and reading *The Hollywood Reporter*. There was a large, garish plant on her desk, its pot wrapped in green foil. Mosserman read the card.

"Success and best wishes from Chic and Herbie."

"Some admirers of yours, Miss Bender?"

"I dunno, Doctuh Mossaman. I could be the two guys who pock the cos, downstayis."

"Ummm."

He examined it. It had orange flowers and fat, succulent leaves. Some hybrid vulgarity from one of the local

nurseries no doubt. Still....

He sniffed it and sneezed.

"Godblessya."

"Thank you."

"Got a funny smell, donnit? I sneezed too when I smelled it."

Mosserman made a mental note to have Chic and Herbie located and shot. Then, telling Miss Bender that she could go home, he retired into his office to make a few phone calls. Morris' answer machine asked for a message, and Mosserman hung up on it. He'd never had anything to say to machines. Prudhoe's number didn't answer at all. Probably still at his office. He decided to try again in fifteen minutes and went back to "Casablanca."

The pounding on the door awakened Mosserman and he saw, to his surprise, that it was dark. Turning on the lights, he wandered into the outer office and unlocked the door.

It was impossible.

Standing in front of him in checkered suits and straw boaters were Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. They hustled into the office, Costello going directly to the foil-wrapped plant. Mosserman had a sudden flash of panic.

"Hey, Doc, you got the plant. Great."

"Yeah, Doc," Abbott chimed in. "We sent them to everyone we knew: you, Prudhoe, Matsumura the instrument salesman, all our distributors.

Don't they make great gifts?"

"I thought you promised to lock them up?"

"Yeah, but we got to feeling this afternoon like they ought to get some exposure, get out in the world. Why coop them up on a nice spring day like this?"

"It's night, Chic."

Don't get technical, Herbie."

"Yeah, I know, Chic, but my mom-my allus told me to get things right, and that's what I try ta do."

"Do you believe this guy, Doc?"

But Mosserman had wandered back into his office and was looking at the full moon through his window. As he watched, something disturbingly large flew past it. He walked to the window and was startled as the thing returned and grappled onto the window, looking at him: bat wings, long canines, immaculate formal attire and pale complexion. It was Prudhoe, and Mosserman realized somehow just how appropriate that was. He clawed at the window for a moment, then gave up, winging off toward Laurel Canyon where Mrs. Gutridge lived. Let's see how the old lady's colon responds to that.

Mosserman turned back. Chic and Herbie were in the doorway, grinning.

"That was Prudhoe, wasn't it? Didn't he look great?"

"I dunno, Chic. I don't like that supernatural stuff."

Strickland smacked Biddle across the hat.

"Ah, ya big sissy. Ya don't see the Doc carryin' on that way, do ya?"

"No, indeed," Mosserman replied, with great gravity. "There is little in this city that escapes me. Little that I am not aware of." He glanced out of the window. "I see that your colleague Matsumura is over in the Sepulveda Basin, pulling down power lines."

Chic and Herbie hurried to the window, and the three of them watched Godzilla advancing slowly on the Sepulveda Basin dam. Luckily, at this time of year, it was dry. They could hear sirens in the distance.

"Wow, c'mon, Herbie, we gotta get over there. Thanks, Doc, you were a big help. C'mon, Herbie."

"Chic, I donwanna go near no big

monster."

"Ah, ya sissy, what are ya afraid of? C'mon."

With the slam of a door, they were gone. Mosserman regarded the chaos breaking out over the San Fernando Valley and reflected that this would surely have an adverse effect on property values. Perhaps now Rick could be persuaded to sell his cafe. Yes, with a little luck, he, Ferrari, would soon own the Cafe Americain. It was going to be a good night indeed.

With a chuckle, he donned his fez, hit the lights and waddled toward the door, pausing only to kill the fly with a well-aimed swat. After all, in today's world, isolationism was no longer a practical policy.

Coming next month...

...is our special 33rd anniversary issue, featuring:

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Watch for the October issue, on sale September 2, or use the coupon on page 116.

Jane Yolen's latest book is DRAGON'S BLOOD
(Delacorte), and her latest tale of the sea appears below.

The Undine

BY

JANE YOLEN

Aqua est mutabilis. Water is changeable, female, mutable. The gods of the sea are male, but the sea herself female, Restless, Changing.

So the prince thought as he stared over the waves, the furrows becoming mountains, the mountains tumbling down into troughs. Female into male, male into female. Changing.

He pushed his scarlet hat to the back of his head because the feather tickled his cheek. Women were in his thoughts all the time, as bothersome as the feather on his skin. Flickering, always flickering, on the edge of thought. He could not leave women alone. He was to be married within a week.

He had never met his bride, that was not the courtship of royalty. But he had seen a portrait of her, a miniature done by a painter whose pockets were even now lined with gold from

the girl's father. Such paintings told nothing truly, not even the color of hair. His own portrait, sent in return, showed a handsome youth with yellow curls, though in fact his hair was more the color of a sparrow's belly, buffy and streaked. The lies of kings are lightly told.

"I will not mind," he thought to himself. "I will not mind if she is less than beautiful, as long as she is not too changeable. As long as she is not under the water sign." He longed for stability even as he sought change, a king's wish.

But a messenger arrived that night who was one of his own. Under the cover of darkness the messenger confessed, "It is worse than we thought, my lord. She has a face the very map of disease, with pox having carved out the central cities. Her nose is mountainous, her chin the gift of ancestors.

A castle could be built on that promontory."

The prince sighed and dismissed the news-bringer. Then he began to pace the castle battlements, staring out across the crenelations to the sea beyond. His father's father had built wisely; one face of the castle was always turned towards the ocean. It was a palace for sailors and every room was full of the sound of waves.

The prince leaned out over the wall and breathed in the salt spray. A wife whose face put a mountain range to shame. How could he — who loved the seascape, who loved beauty in women above all things — abide it? He longed suddenly for an ending, a sea-change from his situation, but he had neither the heart for it nor the imagination. Princes are not bred to it. He sighed again.

It was the sigh that did it. It reeled out as eagerly as a fisherman's line and cast itself into the sea. What woman can resist the sound of a man's sigh? He had caught many maidens on it, many matrons as well. But this time it was the daughter of a sea-king who was caught on *that* hook. She rose to his bait and sang him back his sigh.

Now it must be remembered that the songs of mermaids have a charm compounded of water and air, the signs of impermanence. That is both their beauty and their danger. Many men have been caught, gaffed, reeled under and drowned by the lure of that song.

Rising only to the edge of her waist — for she knew full well how the sight of a tail affects mortal men — the mermaid showed the prince her shell-like breasts, her pearly skin, the phosphorescence of her hair. She held a webbed hand over her mouth, her fingers as slim as the ribs of a fan. Then she pulled her hand away, displaying her smile. She was well trained in the arts of seduction, as was he. Royalty abounds in it.

The prince leaned out over the castle wall, his legs on land but his arms and head over water. As amphibious as she, he gave himself to her, though he was not his own to give. It was a promise as mutable as water, for the lies of kings are lightly told.

We have all been warned of such bargains. That promise worked its own kind of magic and the undine rose from the waves on legs, her scales washed away by the prince's rote of love. But magic has consequences, as any magic-maker knows. The undine half expected the worst — and got it. Her new legs bit like knife-points into her waist. Still, it was no worse than the pain of menses; even seamaids are slaves to the tides. She smiled again and walked gingerly ashore.

The prince ran down to greet her, leaving bootmarks in the sand. If he had asked, she would have even danced before him and never felt the pain. Some women believe lies — even the ones they tell themselves. Especially those.

The undine put her hand in his, and he shivered at her touch. Her hand was cold and slippery as a fish; the webbing between her fingers pulsed strangely against his skin. There was a strong sea scent about her, like tuna or like crab. But her chin and nose were small, and her eyes as blue as lagoons, and fathomless. He smiled his watery promise at her and gestured towards his room. He did not speak, knowing that mermaids have no tongues, forgetting in his human way that they had ears. Still, in love, gesture can be enough.

She followed him, knife upon knife, and smiling. The prince took her to his room by a hidden route, the steps up to it smoothed by the passage of many dainty feet. Each step up was another gash in her side. She gasped and he asked her why.

"It is nothing," she sighed, holding her waist. Her mouth was open, gasping in the air, and she was momentarily as ugly as any fish. But the moment passed.

He did not ask again. Some men believe lies — especially if it is to their convenience.

His room was like a ship's cabin, the waves always knocking at the walls. He locked the door behind them and turned towards her. She did not ask for ceremony. His touch was enough, rougher on her skin than the ocean. She enjoyed the novelty of it. She enjoyed his bed, heavy with humanity. Lying on it, her knife legs no longer ached.

Her touch on him was water-smooth and soothing. He forgot his marriage. He was always able to forget the demands of royalty in this manner. It was why he forgot so often — and so well.

But those demands are as constant as clockwork. The week ticked away as inexorably as a gold watch and the monstrous bride was shipped across the waves.

She resembled an armada, rough hewn and wooden, with a mighty prow and guardsmen in her wake. Noisy as seagulls, her attendants knocked on his door. He was forced by tradition to attend her. The undine he left behind.

"I love you. My love is an ocean," he whispered into her seashell ears before he left.

But she knew that such water was changeable. It was subject to tides. Hers was at an ebb. She no longer trusted his sighs. As soon as the door shut, she left the bed, the knife points were as sharp as if newly honed. The mirror on the wall did not reflect her beauty. It showed only a watery shadow, changing and shifting, as she passed.

The salt smell of the ocean, sharp and steady, called to her from the window. Looking out, she saw her sisters, the waves, beckoning her with their white arms. She could even hear the rough neighing of the horses of the sea. She left two mermaid tears, crystals with a bit of salt embedded in them, on

his pillow. Then painfully she climbed up onto the corbeled windowsill and flung herself back at the sea.

It opened to her, gathered her in, washed her clean.

The prince found the crystals and made them into earbobs for his ugly wife. They did not improve her looks. But she proved a strong, stable queen

for him, and ruled the kingdom on her own. She gave him much love, she played him like a fish. She swore to him that she did not mind his many affairs or that he spoke in his sleep of undines.

She swore, and he believed her. But the lies of kings are not *always* lightly told.



"Hold it!"

Nancy Kress wrote "Casey's Empire," November 1981. Her new story is about a baffling evolutionary mental process known as "Peekback."

A Little Matter of Timing

BY

NANCY KRESS

So I see by the newspapers that they caught him, holed up in some hick town in Wisconsin. Serves the punk right, to get nailed in a dead prairie burg. Hadn't of been for him, I'd still be where I should be, in the middle of the discarded popcorn boxes and the smell of the cat dens and the spread of the ferris neons against a night sky, with Lefty one tent down on the razzle-dazzle and Dora hoofing over from the hootch tent with a cold beer when it's time to do the Box bit. Course, all that's probably not the same now; everything's probably already changed.

But not as much as it's going to.

It had been a slow morning. I loitered outside the tent, trying to work up enough energy to do the old barker bit and maybe draw in a few more of the gawkers shuffling up and

down the midway. There was enough of a breeze to stir the icecream wrappers and candy-apple sticks not yet fused into the melting tar. Behind me the tent glistened in minty greens — I had pumped in fresh fluid this morning, filling the thin space between the double tempaplas domes with swirls of the coolest colors I could mix — but inside it was already hot as hell. Who can afford to run 'ditioners on what a peekback show pulls? And no matter what the bastards in advertising say, tempaplas is just as hot as canvas ever was. Oh, yeah, I can remember canvas tents — I'm older than I look. Don't ask by how much.

A fat woman in an acid-yellow jumpsuit waddled by, dragging a kid by the hand. The kid was sticky with cotton candy and catsup.

"Peekback show, wonder of the ages," I called out half-heartedly. God,

it was hot. "Try your skill, win fabulous exotic prizes! Or gasp with amazement as you watch death-defying competition among courageous men and women living on borrowed time!"

The instant the pitch was out, I regretted it. The fat dame didn't seem the type to want the thrill of maybe seeing some guy die on the spot from peek-back overload. You get to know the look, a sort of ferret clamminess, and she didn't have it. I was losing my touch.

Sure enough, she pursed up her fat little mouth and tugged harder at the kid's arm. He braced his heels on the sticky tar and started to whine.

"I wanna see the peekback show! I wanna see the peekback show!"

"No! Come on!"

"Please, Ma! Puh-leeeese! I wanna see the show!"

"I said no!"

"But they got a real contest, with real prizes! I wanna see the loser's head split open and his brains ooze out!"

She stopped dead — the kid almost fell over backwards — and hissed at him through her pursed lips like some enormous yellow pickle-sucking cobra.

"Where'd you learn talk like that? Where? Randall, I asked you a question!"

The kid had the sense to keep quiet. She glared at him, then at me. "See what your so-called shows do to innocent little children? Corrupt them with

blood-lust and callousness! Making a spectacle for profit out of men ruining their minds! You should be ashamed of yourself!" She yanked again at the kid and he dragged after her down the midway, looking back over his corrupted shoulder.

I shrugged. Some mornings are like that.

After a while, though, thinking about her began to get to me, so I peekbacked so's I could give her — or her image, anyway — a piece of my mind. It had been maybe six minutes, but I pride myself on being pretty good — a lot better than most of the marks that try the show. I got a clear image focused on the pavement, hardly any fuzziness, of the dame ranting there six minutes ago. Fat yellow can and all. But once I had her peekbacked, I couldn't think of a really good put-down, and besides the telltale pressure was already starting up behind my eyeballs. Like I said, I'm older than I look. Once I could peekback nine and a half minutes — damn near a record — with hardly any pain at all, even in an unfamiliar room. I dissolved the image and went inside.

A head count turned up two marks, not counting Harry, nineteen gawkers, and a fed. Clem had already registered the marks and collected their entrance fees, and they stood up on the rickety wooden ballyhoo stand, shuffling back and forth and trying to ignore the gawkers on the tempaplas benches below. The fed stood out like

a panther in a tiger cage, mostly because he was trying so hard not to look like a fed. Poison-green jumpsuit a shade too poisonous, long hair in careful holiday disarray, more phony-spark jewelry than even the panty-peelers in the hootch tent wear. I passed, went to the john, and then started behind the curtain to tell Dora she should get dressed and leave. The fed nodded to me as I went by, and I realized it was the same one I'd had hanging around the last town back. Some cover!

Lately, though, they don't seem to try much for a real cover, at least not one that works for carnies as well as gawkers. They're supposed to be there to see that the show is "honest," that no one knows beforehand the order of the objects in the Box, and at first it was a real pain in the ass because it meant I had to hire a different shill for every show. I thought that otherwise they'd slough the joint. But now the feds and I have sort of silently decided that Harry can be the permanent shill, when he's not busy doing his own pretty-boy muscleman gig, so long as the marks don't lose too much money and so long as we don't seem to be rooking any widows or orphans. Anyway, it would be pretty stupid for the feds to pretend we don't all know why they're really haunting a penny-ante peekback show. Not since Varysburg.

Varysburg was another hick town, a real struggle spot notable only because a mark pushed his peekback

too far and ruptured his brain at the 9:00 p.m. show. In two minutes a fed had the dead joe's woman's signature on a "medical research autopsy release form," and the poor sucker had been rushed to a peekback-research foundation to have a bunch of scientists take apart his brain and move "one step closer to a true understanding of this baffling evolutionary mental process."

And the fat dame called me blood-thirsty.

Dora was still at work in the Box, her long naked body twitching in all the right places, but her make-up was melting in the heat. I motioned her out of the empty Box, and with a last bump and grind she sashayed out and behind the curtain.

"Jesus, what kept you? I gotta piss bad, and the show in the hootch tent starts in five minutes!"

"Sorry, Dora. The john won't open for a while. I just used it." I got a ten-minute lock on the john door. Not many can peekback that far, but I don't take a chance. The image of me pissing is nobody's business.

"Jesus, what an old lady," she snarled. I laughed, slapped her playfully on her bare rump, and went out front to start the clock and my spiel.

"Ladies and Gentlemen — your attention puh-leese! The thrilling and dangerous Art of the Peekback is about to begin! Before you on the stage are three — no, four! Pardon me, Ladies and Gents, four intrepid contestants standing under the clock, four

men sure enough of their skill to risk life and mind in competition for the fabulous prizes you see displayed to the left of the stage! A hand to salute the courage of these brave folk!"

Ragged clapping; an old farm-type in the first row sniffed and stared, hands not moving from his knees.

"Your silence is requested, Ladies and Gentlemen, during these fabulous feats of concentration. In addition, would you please give each contestant every advantage by putting out your smokes." Actually, smoke makes no difference to a peekback and the gawkers would realize it if they gave it half a brain's thought, but the request sounds impressive. While they ground out their cigarettes and tokes, I took a few seconds to study the fourth contestant, the kid that Clem must have registered and read-the-risks to while I was in the john.

He stood out as much as the fed did. Expensive truleather jumpsuit, with tailoring quality you don't see in your average dumb gawker. His jewelry had a wicked gleam that looked real, and there was a lot of it. But the kid himself didn't look like a slumming joedough. His pimply face had the hooded, restless look of a street punk willing to score for a good meal and an ugly broad. I could see the fed standing in the back, watching the kid with an intent casualness, and I didn't like the whole set-up. But the timing in a peekback show doesn't leave room for questions.

"And so with no further ado, Ladies and Gents — the first test!"

Dramatically I flung open the front of the empty Box. There was a moment of silence, and then a snicker rippled through the tent as the marks — and most of the gawkers, who always play along until it starts to hurt — peek-backed Dora going through her bit.

"Time," called Clem. "Hold up youse slates."

All four had it right, of course. Hell, even a baby can peekback one and a half minutes. Two had written "woman," the kid had scrawled "dame," and Harry had done one of his lightning sketches of Dora with her tits filling the whole slate. That drew the usual laugh.

"She's not the prize, boys!" I called, rolling my eyes, in mock anger. Another laugh. "Second test — three minutes!"

Most of the gawkers got this one, too: a huge banana "sweating" water. A few got the gag and guffawed while the rest eyed them resentfully, wondering if the joke was somehow on *them*. As we worked back through the objects Clem had placed in the Box and then removed seven minutes ago, I could see the gawkers give up trying to peekback along with the marks. One by one they got that bulgy-eyed, wincing look that means the pressure and pain are building up in whatever part of the brain does peekback, and then they gave up straining before they keeled over.

One of the marks missed an object and stormed out of the tent, muttering about fraud. So he lost a pretty stiff entry fee — the sucker chose to play, and it so happened this wasn't even Harry's turn to win. Takes all kinds.

Harry dropped out at seven and a half minutes, after hysterically identifying a coiled rope as a cobra. He slumped sheepishly in a seat in the front row, grinning like an idiot, while the crowd heckled him. All except the fed; he never took his eyes off the punk kid.

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen," I said, dropping my voice to a heavy whisper, but a fast one, "A true test, a sorting of the boys from the men. A worthy vision, but a dangerous one, my friends — men have been known to not return from the heroic effort to see nine minutes into the past — a past, that, let me remind you, was sealed to all only three short generations ago! So, let us salute these brave men with a reverential ten seconds of silence."

Most of the gawkers looked confused, then dropped their eyes to the ground. Before the drama could turn to embarrassed shuffling, I yanked open the Box, and all eyes snapped to its empty interior. The kid and his opponent, a local farmhand with hands like slabs of raw beef, stared until their eyes bulged and their foreheads knotted into sweaty ridges.

I knew what they were seeing. Nine minutes ago Clem had removed an

overripe peach from the Box. The kid and the yokel would be straining to focus a blurry, fist-sized mass, probably round but wavering in outline as the peekback slipped and jumped, of no definite color. Color was always the first to go at anything over eight minutes. The thing could be a baseball, an orange, an ostrich egg, a rock, even a wheel if you were one of those that lost depth-perception over seven minutes. As the seconds ticked by, the image would blur even more, while the pain tore through your overloaded brain until you could hardly see and it felt like the top of your head would blow off....

The yokel groaned and the gawkers went "aaahhh," and leaned toward him. His eyes were watery red where the little blood vessels had burst; the rest of his face was almost purple. He fell to his knees, clawing at the air in front of him with feeble swipes of his huge flabby hands.

"Aaaaahhh," they all went again.

Something — I swear I'll never know what — made me look from him to the kid. He wasn't looking at the Box at all. While everyone else watched the collapsing yokel, he dropped the straining peekback look and swung his gaze to the prize board, furrowing up his pimples and sucking in his cheeks. After a long moment he smiled with one side of his mouth, then wrote something on his slate. Only then did he look at the gasping man next to him on the bally stand.

The yokel was still on his knees, but his face was pink again, and he was drawing in great draughts of air. His eyes crossed, then uncrossed, and his forehead began to look less like somebody had tied it in knots. After a minute he staggered to his feet.

"Ooooohhh," said the gawkers, disappointed, and settled back onto their benches.

"A death-defying exhibition, sir!" I called, and flourished my hat to the sap who was stupid enough to fry his brain for some gaudy carny prize. "A true study in courage! And now, Gentlemen, if you'll write your answers ... there ... the moment we've all been waiting for! The moment of victory or defeat, of triumph or failure ... your slates, please!"

The yokel had written "ball" in wobbly letters that trailed off at the end into a smear of chalkdust. On the kid's slate, in heavy block letters, was "peech."

"A winner!" I shouted, as Clem came out from behind the curtain with a rotten peach dribbling juice all over his jumpsuit. I grabbed the kid's hand and raised it above his head, then led him over to the prize board. The gawkers shouted as though they had actually won something themselves, and then turned to gather up their stuff and leave. None of them made it, though, because the punk and I hadn't been standing in front of the prize board for thirty seconds when all hell broke loose.

The fed leaped forward with gun drawn and shouted, "Stop, police!" The kid took one look, hit the ground already rolling, and came up with a snub-nosed special that he started firing even before he grabbed some shrieking dame for cover. Gawkers screamed, the shots echoed in the tent, and I heard the tempaplas shatter overhead; a second later green rain gushed down on the scrambling bodies and fallen benches and overturned picnic baskets. I had the sense to dive for the ground and creep behind the Box, crawling over cigarette butts soaked with green tempaplas fluid and sour peach juice.

In less than a minute it was all over. The kid made it out of the tent with the fed scrambling after him, both of them plugging away while the screaming spread in concentric circles down the midway. Inside the tent nobody was actually hurt except the yokel still on the bally stand, who was clutching his arm where a slug had grazed across the flesh and left a pulpy red smear. The red was streaked with the green rain like some kind of bloody Christmas card, and the yokel was staring at the arm like he never saw it before. It definitely wasn't his day.

That afternoon I sold out of the carny.

The kid's picture looks back at me from every newspaper, and the legal

shouting could scorch your ears. Nobody ever called me to testify. No need — the fed knew even before I did that the punk was peekbacking not at the past when the damn peach was still in the Box, but at the future, when I was holding up his hand in front of the prize board. But they're not calling it peekbacking; no name has really stuck yet. Forepeek, peekahead, prepeek, proph. I hear some magazine is holding a contest.

The scientists are all panting to get their hands on that brain, of course. But you can't execute a man for *attempted* homicide. Not for fraud, either, even if he had been getting rich looking one minute into the future of poker hands, roulette wheels, and crap games. One minute — that's all he can manage, they say. But, then, the punk's stupid, or he wouldn't have felt the need to strut his stuff at the crummy peekback shows where he first discovered he could do it. Maybe the others, the other kids in the "second evolutionary wave" I keep reading about — maybe they'll do it better. One minute is pretty thin.

I got a good price for the show, even with the hole in the tent. The sucker I sold it to didn't realize yet that if forepeek — hell, I have to call it something — spreads the way peekback did a few generations ago, games

of chance are finished. A minute counts in more than humping.

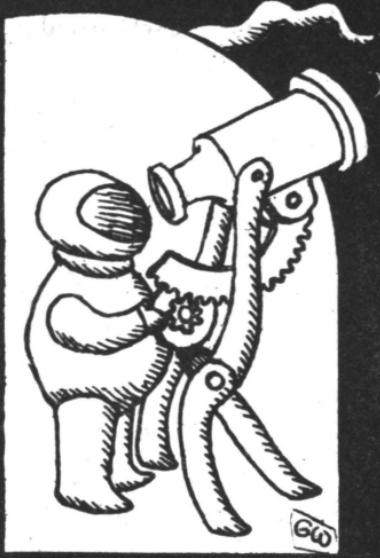
But I miss it, the set-up and the ballyhoos and the shimmy shakers and the sound of Lefty's pitch one tent down. I liked the life. Hell, I didn't sell out because every gawker who walked in the door might be able to forepeek and swindle some other gawker who can't. So the house losses go up; there wasn't all that much to lose.

It wasn't even getting left behind with the ones too old to forepeek. I can remember the way my parents looked the first time I told them I had peekedback in their bedroom — they could never do it at all. If my old lady could live with being left behind, I could too. No, it's something else.

I saw that punk's face as he twisted up his pimples to stare at the prize board. I saw the panicked confusion in his eyes, and the sudden queasy spasm at the corner of his mouth. It was the same disoriented look gawkers have when they get off the Dervo-Whirl, don't know which way is up, and go staggering around the midway knocking people over. And if I'm right, the kids coming up are gonna be a scary bunch.

What must it be like to stare at a spot, straining and grunting, looking farther and farther into the past or the future — and not know which?





Science

ISAAC ASIMOV

BIG BROTHER

I was engaged in casual conversation with a young man the other day, and its natural course led him to remark that the south nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine was going to be constructed. (A nave, as I suppose you all know, is a long narrow hall, or corridor, that is part of a church.)

As soon as the young man said the word "Nave," it occurred to me at once that if only the architect were named Hartz, and if a couple of ladies of the evening had managed to make it to the church before being caught by a pursuing policeman intent on an arrest, and if the ladies claimed sanctuary, then the policeman would be justified in declaiming:

"The nave of Hartz;

It stole those tarts!"

in parody of the well-known nursery rhyme concerning the "knave of hearts."

Since I am a devotee of word-play, and since I admired this conceit I had invented, I felt I had to display it to the young man with whom I was conversing.

So I began: "Now if it should happen that the south nave were being constructed by an architect named Hartz—"

The young man said, "Yes, David Hartz."

"David Hartz?" I said, puzzled.

"Yes. Isn't he the one you're referring to? David Hartz of Yale, I think. Do you know him?"

"Are you serious? Is the architect really named Hartz?"

"Yes! You're the one who brought up his name."

What could I do? I was face to face with another Coincidence, and it killed my piece of word-play, which would have seemed drab by comparison. I didn't bother to trot it out.

Still, if the young man is correct about the name of the architect, then I trust that the structure will be known as "the nave of Hartz" through all eternity, and I will gladly bribe two young women of the appropriate profession to seek refuge there, so as to make my word-play come true.

But coincidences are to be found not only in everyday life, but in science also, and thereby hangs a tale—

When chemists were studying the elements during the 19th Century, they discovered a number of interesting similarities between one element and another. If no order existed among the elements, then those similarities would be merely unexplained (and, perhaps, unexplainable) coincidences, and they would make scientists as uncomfortable as fleas make a dog.

Chemists tried to find order and, in so doing, succeeded in establishing the periodic table of the elements (see BRIDGING THE GAPS, F&SF, March 1970).

Of all the elements in the list, carbon should be the dearest to us, since it is through its unusual (and, perhaps, unique) properties that life on Earth is possible.

In fact, we might even argue, if we were in a conservative mood, that carbon is the only conceivable basis of life *anywhere* in the Universe (see THE ONE AND ONLY, F&SF, November 1972).*

Yet how can carbon be unique? According to the periodic table, carbon does not stand alone, but is the head of a "carbon family" made up of chemically similar elements. The carbon family consists of five stable elements: carbon itself, silicon, germanium, tin and lead.

*More radical views are possible, as in Life Beyond Earth by Gerald Feinberg and Robert Shapiro (Morrow, 1980), which I heartily recommend to all of you.

Within a family, chemical similarities are strongest between elements adjacent to each other. This means that the element most similar to carbon in chemical properties is silicon, the next in line, and it is silicon with which this essay will deal.

Carbon has an atomic number of 6 and silicon one of 14. (By comparison, the atomic numbers of germanium, tin, and lead, are 32, 50 and 82 respectively.) Silicon has an atomic weight of 28, compared to carbon's 12. The silicon atom is therefore 2-1/3 times as massive as the carbon atom is. Silicon is carbon's big brother, so to speak.

The atomic number tells us the number of electrons circling the nucleus of an intact atom. Carbon has 6 electrons divided into two shells, 2 electrons in the inner shell, 4 in the outer one. Silicon, on the other hand, has 14 electrons divided into three shells; 2 in the innermost, 8 in the intermediate one, and 4 in the outermost. As you see, then, carbon and silicon each have 4 electrons in the shell farthest from the nucleus. We could describe carbon as (2/4) and silicon as (2/8/4) in terms of the electron content of their atoms.

When a carbon atom collides with another atom of any kind, it is the 4 electrons on the outskirts of the carbon atoms that interact with the electrons in the other atom in one way or another. It is this interaction that produces what we call a chemical change. When a silicon atom collides, it is again the 4 electrons on the outskirts that interact.

All electrons are identical down to the finest measurements scientists can make. The 4 outermost electrons of carbon and the 4 of silicon behave similarly, for that reason, and the chemical properties of the two elements are, therefore, also similar.

But in that case, if carbon, with 4 electrons on the outskirts of its atoms, has the kind of chemical properties that allows it to serve as the basis of life, ought not silicon, with its four electrons on the outskirts, also serve as a basis of life?

To answer that question, let's start at the beginning.

Silicon is an extremely common element. Next to oxygen, it is the most common component of Earth's crust. Some 46.6 percent of the total mass of the Earth's crust consists of oxygen atoms, and about 27.7 percent is silicon. (The other eighty elements that occur in the crust, taken together, make up the remaining 25.7 percent.) In other words, if we leave oxygen out of account, then there is more silicon in the Earth's crust than everything else put together.

Just the same, don't expect to stumble over a piece of silicon the next time you venture out into the world. It won't happen. Silicon is not to be found on Earth in its elemental form; that is, you won't find a chunk of matter made up of silicon atoms only. In the Earth's crust, all the silicon atoms that exist are combined with other kinds of atoms, chiefly those of oxygen, and therefore exist as "compounds."

For that matter, you can't pick up a hunk of Earth's crust, and squeeze pure oxygen out of it, either, since the oxygen atoms present are combined with other kinds of atoms, chiefly silicon. There is considerable elemental oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere, but there is no free silicon to speak of anywhere in our reach.

Here we come across some differences between silicon and carbon. For one thing, carbon is not as common as silicon in the Earth's crust. For every 370 silicon atoms, there is only 1 carbon atom. (That still leaves carbon comparatively common, however.)

This is peculiar, since in the Universe as a whole, smaller atoms are more common than larger atoms (with some exceptions, for reasons that are understood), and carbon atoms are distinctly smaller than silicon atoms. In the Universe as a whole, astronomers estimate that there are 7 carbon atoms for every 2 silicon atoms.

Why, then, is Earth's crust comparatively carbon-poor? We'll let that go for now, but I promise I will return to this matter, eventually.

Carbon, like silicon, is usually found in combination with other atoms, chiefly oxygen, but unlike silicon, sizable quantities of carbon are to be found in elemental form, as chunks of matter containing carbon atoms almost entirely. Coal, for instance, is anywhere from 85 to 95 percent carbon atoms.

But, then, coal originates from decaying plant material. It is the product of life. If carbon did not have properties that allowed it to serve as a basis for life, it would not occur in the free state in Earth's crust.

We might, conversely, argue that if silicon were enough like carbon to serve as the basis for another variety of life, it, too, would be likely to occur in the free state, when silicon life broke down. Consequently, if we find out why silicon won't serve as the basis of life, we will also find why it does not occur free as carbon does.

(As a matter of fact, the only reason oxygen occurs free in the atmosphere is because of the activity of plant life, which liberates oxygen as a side-effect of photosynthesis. If life did not exist on Earth, the only elements that would occur free would be those that were particularly inert,

chemically. Most of these, like helium or platinum, are very rare. The least rare of the inert elements is nitrogen and, as a result, there are sizable quantities of free nitrogen not only in the atmosphere of Earth, a planet rich in life, but also in the atmosphere of Venus, a totally barren planet!)

Even though nature has not been kind enough to prepare silicon in elemental form for us, chemists have learned to do it on their own. Two French chemists, Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac (1778-1850) and Louis Jacques Thénard (1777-1857), managed, in 1809, to decompose a silicon-containing compound and to obtain a reddish-brown material out of it. They did not examine it further. It is probable that this material was a mass of elemental silicon, though containing much in the way of impurities.

In 1824, the Swedish chemist, Jöns Jakob Berzelius (1779-1848) obtained a similar mass of silicon by a somewhat different chemical route. Unlike Gay-Lussac and Thénard, however, Berzelius realized what he had, and went to considerable trouble to get rid of the non-silicon impurities.

Berzelius was the first to get reasonably pure silicon and to study what he had and report on its properties. For that reason, Berzelius is usually credited with the discovery of silicon.

Berzelius's silicon was "amorphous"; that is, the individual silicon atoms were arranged in an irregular fashion so that no visible crystals formed. (The word "amorphous" is from Greek, meaning "no shape," since crystals are distinguished by their regular geometrical form.)

In 1854, the French chemist Henri Étienne Sainte-Claire Deville (1818-1881) prepared silicon crystals for the first time. These shone with a metallic luster, and this might make it seem that silicon is different from carbon in another important way; that silicon is a metal and carbon is not.

That, however, is not so. Although silicon has some properties that are similar to those of metals generally, it has others that are not, and it is therefore a "semi-metal." Carbon, in the form of graphite, also has some metallic properties (it conducts electricity moderately well, for instance.) The two elements, consequently, are not startlingly different in this respect.

Carbon atoms, to be sure, are not bound to arrange themselves in the manner that produces graphite. They may also arrange themselves in a more compact and symmetrical manner in order to produce diamond, which shows no metallic properties whatever (see THE UNLIKELY TWINS, F&SF, October 1972).

Diamond is particularly notable for being hard, and, in 1891, the Amer-

ican inventor Edward Goodrich Acheson (1856-1931) discovered that carbon, when heated with clay, yields another very hard substance. Acheson thought the substance was carbon combined with alundum (a compound of aluminum and oxygen atoms, both of which are found in clay.)

He therefore called the new hard substance "carborundum."

Actually, carborundum turned out to be a compound of carbon and silicon (silicon atoms are also found in clay). The compound consisted of silicon and carbon atoms in equal quantities ("silicon carbide," or, in chemical symbols, SiC). This mixture of atoms took on the compact and symmetrical arrangement that occurs in diamond.

In carborundum, the carbon and silicon atoms are placed alternately within the crystal structure. The fact that one can substitute silicon atoms for every other carbon atom and still have a very hard substance, shows how similar the two elements are. (Not all properties are preserved, however. Carborundum does not have the transparency or beauty of diamond.)

Carborundum, incidentally, is not quite as hard as diamond. Why is that?

Well, silicon and carbon atoms are chemically similar, thanks to the fact that both have 4 electrons in the outermost shell, but they are not identical. The silicon atom has three electron shells compared to the carbon atom's two. That means the distance from the outermost shell of the silicon atom to its nucleus is greater than in the case of the carbon atom.

The electrons carry a negative electric charge and are held in place by the attraction of the positive charge on the atom's nucleus. This attractive force decreases with distance and is therefore weaker in the silicon atom than in the smaller carbon atom.

Furthermore, between the outermost electrons and the nucleus in the silicon atom are the 10 electrons of the two inner shells, but in the case of carbon, only the 2 electrons of the lone inner shell intervene. Each negatively-charged inner electron, existing between the outermost shell and the nucleus, tends to neutralize the nucleus's positive charge somewhat and weakens the nucleus's hold on the outermost electrons.

When two carbon atoms cling together, that is because of the attractive force generated by the association of two electrons (one from each atom). The more firmly those two electrons are held by the respective nuclei of the two atoms, the stronger the bond between them.

Therefore, the carbon-carbon bond is stronger than the silicon-silicon bond, and the silicon-carbon bond should be of intermediate strength.

One way of demonstrating this is by melting point. As the temperature rises, the atoms vibrate more and more strongly until finally, they break the bonds holding them together and slide over each other freely. The solid has become a liquid. The tighter the bonds, therefore, the higher the melting point must be.

Carbon doesn't actually melt, but "sublimes"; that is, it turns from a solid into a vapor directly; but we'll call that the melting point just the same. The melting point of carbon is over 3500 C while that of silicon is only 1410 C. Carborundum (which, like carbon, sublimes) has the intermediate melting point of 2700 C.

Again, you can judge the tightness of the bond by the hardness of the substance. The stronger the bond between the atoms, the more the substance resists deformation, the more easily it inflicts deformation (in the form of scratches, for instance) upon other, softer substances.

Diamond is the hardest substance known. Carborundum is not quite as hard, but is harder than silicon.

Despite the fact that carborundum is not quite as hard as diamond, it is more useful as an "abrasive" (something hard enough to wear down, through friction, softer objects, without itself being much affected). Why?

The answer is a matter of price. We all know how rare and expensive diamonds are, even impure ones of less-than-gem quality. Carborundum, on the other hand, can be made out of ordinary carbon and clay, both of which are about as cheap as anything can reasonably be expected to be.

I said earlier that silicon atoms are, in nature, most frequently found in combination with oxygen atoms. The oxygen atom is readily able to accept two electrons from another atom, combining each electron it accepts with one of its own. Two electron-pairs are formed between the two atoms, and this is called a "double-bond," which we can represent in the following fashion: "Si=O". The silicon atom has four outer electrons, however, and it is perfectly capable of donating two electrons to each of two different oxygen atoms.

The result is O=Si=O, which can also be represented, more simply, as SiO₂, and which can be called "silicon dioxide." It is an old-fashioned habit, arising in the days when chemists did not know exactly how many atoms of each element were present in combination (or that there were atoms at all), to have the name of a compound of some element with oxygen end with a final "a." Consequently, silicon dioxide is also called "silica."

In fact, silica was the name that was used first, and the final "a" indicated that it was suspected of being a combination of oxygen with an element that had not yet been isolated. Once the other element was obtained, it was named "silicon" from silica, the "n" ending being conventional for a non-metallic element, as in boron, hydrogen, and chlorine.

The purest form of silica, when it contains virtually nothing but silicon and oxygen atoms, is best-known as "quartz," a word of unknown origin.

The astonishing thing about quartz, if it is pure enough, is that it is transparent. There are very few naturally-occurring solids that allow light to pass through with scarcely any absorption, and quartz is one of those few.

The first such substance that early man encountered was ice, which if it is formed slowly, and in a reasonably thin layer, is transparent. When men who had encountered ice later encountered quartz, they could only think they had found another form of ice, one which had formed in so super-rigid a manner under such super-cold conditions, that it was no longer capable of melting.

The Greeks, therefore, called quartz, "krystallos," which was their word for 'ice.' This became "crystallum" in Latin and "crystal" in English. The prefix "cry" is still used to mean "very cold" as in "cryogenics" (the production of ultra-low temperatures), "cryometer" (a thermometer for registering ultra-low temperatures), and so on.

"Crystal," as an English word for "ice," is, however, obsolete now. It is more often used to signify a transparent object, even when it is not made of quartz. For instance, we still talk of a fortune-teller looking into her "crystal ball," which is, of course, simply glass.

Then, too, when the Greeks said that each planet was part of a sphere, and turned with its sphere, those came to be spoken of as "crystalline spheres" because of their transparency. (They were *totally* transparent, for they didn't exist.)

Quartz was usually found in straight-line, smooth-plane, sharp-angled shapes, and the word "crystal" came to mean that. Naturally-occurring solids of such shapes came to be called "crystals," whether they were quartz or not.

Quartz is not necessarily transparent, because it is not necessarily sufficiently pure. If the impurity is not very great, the quartz may stay transparent but gain a color, the best and most beautiful example of that is the purple "amethyst."

(The ancient Greeks, noting amethyst's wine color, reasoned, by the

principles of sympathetic magic, that it must counter the effects of wine. Wine drunk from an amethyst cup, they were sure, would taste great but would not intoxicate. In fact, "amethyst" is from Greek words meaning "no wine." (Don't bother to try it; it won't work.)

With greater amounts of impurity, you have silica that is chemically combined with such metals as iron, aluminum, calcium, potassium, and so on — or mixtures of several of these. Such compounds are referred to as "silicates" and are, for the most part, dull and opaque substances. Included among the silicates are granite, basalt, clay and so on. Indeed, Earth's rocky crust, together with the mantle beneath, are largely silicate in nature.

Flint is a common silicate, and it was very important to early man, because it could be chipped or ground into sharp edges and points and was therefore the best thing for tools like knives, hatchets, spear-points, and arrow-points, in any society that lacked metals. The word "flint" is from an old Teutonic term meaning a "rock chip" which was what you got when you worked flint into a tool. The rock chip itself was sometimes the tool.

The Latin word for "flint" is "silex," and if one wished to speak of something that was made "of flint," the genitive form of the word, "silicis," was used. It was from flint, then, that we got first "silica" for silicon dioxide, and then "silicon" for the element.

Small bits of quartz, shattered, usually, by the action of waves on a shore, form "sand"; and the color of sand depends upon the purity of the quartz, and if not pure, on the nature of the impurities. Pure quartz will produce a rather white sand; the usually sandy color of sand (what else?) is due to iron content.

The oxygen atom is smaller than the silicon atom but larger than the carbon atom. Therefore silicon dioxide ought to have a higher melting point than silicon itself does, but a lower one than carborundum.

That, indeed, is the way it works out. Silicon dioxide has a melting point of about 1700 C, which is higher than that of silicon and lower than that of carborundum.

If appropriate substances that contain sodium and calcium atoms are added to sand, and if the mixture is heated, it melts and becomes "glass," which is essentially a sodium-calcium silicate. Other substances can, however, be added to gain certain desired qualities such as color, or hardness, or resistance to temperature change, or limpid transparency.

Glass is, on the whole, as transparent as quartz to visible light, but glass is much more useful in most practical ways.

For one thing, glass can be made out of sand, which is much more com-

mon than intact crystals of quartz, and so it is much cheaper than quartz. For another, glass melts at a lower temperature than quartz, so that it is easier to work with.

Then, too, glass does not really solidify, but remains a liquid. That liquid, however, gets stiffer and stiffer as it cools, until it is a solid to all intents and purposes. The glass we routinely handle is, in short, a liquid because its atomic arrangement is random as in liquids, rather than orderly as in solids; yet it has the rigidity of a solid. This means that glass has no sharp melting point but remains a sort of gooey liquid over a fairly large temperature range, and this, again, makes it easier to work with.

Now, then, can carbon substitute for silicon and produce carbon analogs of quartz, sand, and rock; of silica and silicates?

Carbon can make a good beginning. It, too, can donate two of its four outer electrons to each of two oxygen atoms. The result is O=C=O, or CO₂, which is universally known as "carbon dioxide" and which, from the formula, certainly seems to be an analog of silicon dioxide.

The bond between carbon and oxygen atoms, all things being equal, is stronger than the bond between silicon and oxygen, since carbon atoms are smaller than silicon atoms. Therefore it is only fair to suppose that carbon dioxide will melt at a higher temperature than silicon dioxide will.

Carbon dioxide has a melting point of -78.5C, (though, in actual fact, it sublimes rather than melts), and this is 1800 degrees *lower* than the melting point of silicon dioxide.

Why is that? Well, the answer to that, and to the matter of carbon's comparatively low occurrence on Earth, and to the big question of which will lead to life, and why, must await next month's essay.

CHICON IV, THE 40TH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION will be held September 2-6 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Chicago. Guests of honor are A. Bertram Chandler and Kelly Freas. Memberships are \$75.00. Write: Chicon IV, PO Box A3120, Chicago, IL 60690.

O. Niemand is the pseudonym of a well known sf writer who has set out to create a series of stories based in the domed city of Springfield, each one using the tone and style of a deceased American short story writer. The few we have seen so far are outstanding, both as pastiche and as independent work, and we think you'll be delighted by this first offering. If O. Henry had written Sf, he might have written...

The Wooing of Slowboat Sadie

BY

O. NIEMAND

If you awoke one lugubrious and bleary-eyed morning to the dreadful knowledge that you had, in some manner yet only hazily recollected, lost the person of the wealthiest and most powerful man ever to visit the domed city of Springfield, what would you do about it? Would you inform your superior, the overworked Captain Helfmuhn, fully prepared to listen to his fine collection of oaths and curses? Would you explain to him that you hadn't truly lost the Beshta Shon, that you had merely misplaced him? Would you have the nerve?

You may weep joyful tears, for you have committed no such blunder. But save a salty drop or two for Officer Onayly, who did that very thing. And now you may search along with the kindly officer, who must find the Beshta Shon before lunchtime or be assigned to a new beat out on the

airless side of the great green dome.

Officer Onayly needed to think about his problem, and when he needed to think he always went to Thragan's for a beer. If you don't mind having one with him so early in the day, take a place at the bar between Thragan's regulars and the honest cop. Then you and he may begin the day's adventure refreshed.

"Now, Onayly," said the surprised Thragan himself, "what brings you into me place so early? I'd be thinkin' your head was too big to be mindful of your duties this mornin'. Would you care for a short beer?"

Onayly rubbed his temples and uttered a groan of despair.

"Yes, thank you," he said. "My head feels like I rented it out all night to a pair of midget prospectors. But tell me, Thragan, how did you know my skull ached?"

"When you left here last night," laughed Thragan, "it was plain you'd be forfeitin' to the devil for the time you had." He placed a mug of sunny, foam-topped beer on the bar.

Slowly in an agony of regret to the barkeep's smiling face the copper raised his eyes. "I was in here last night, was I?" he asked.

"Aye, sure," said Thragan, "wid that little pal of yours. Don't you remember? Why, by all the saints, you must not have gone straight home like I told you."

"We saw you in the Sazerac at midnight," said a blowzy red-haired girl.

Officer Onayly was glad that he had found a clue. This was a beginning at least, even if it did come from sources that were often not wholly reliable on other matters.

"Pearl," he asked, hopefully, "when you saw me in the Sazerac, was my little friend there too?"

"Yes," she said, "that's why I followed you there. That little man knows how to spend his money. I wanted to let him know it was my birthday, but he wouldn't let me get near. He kept asking for some other dame."

"Thank you, Pearl," said the relieved minion of the law, "I owe you a favor." He gulped down the last of his beer and walked out of the bar with all the steadiness and dignity expected of a defender of public decency. His next call would be the Sazerac, a place of danger and notoriety and black in-

trigue, and consequently a popular little club among both hoodlums and young businessmen of great promise.

Molly, the barmaid at the Sazerac, called out to the policeman. "Onayly, I didn't expect to see you again for a week! Are you out to give your megrims the fresh air?"

"When I waked this morning, Molly, I was sorry I did. Say, tell me what happened last night. And set up a small one for me too."

Molly drew a beer on the house and put it in front of the penitent cop. "We got pig knuckles on the free lunch today, Onayly."

The officer's eyes bulged and his skin took on the color of pale jade. "No, thank you, Molly," he said, through clenched jaws.

"Who was that sawed-off little fellow?"

"Didn't I introduce you? That was the Beshta Shon himself. He came here to Springfield on a little holiday."

"What is a Beshta Shon?"

Onayly swallowed some cold beer. "If I told you what Cap'n Helfmuhn said to me, you wouldn't believe it. I myself didn't believe it when I heard it. Where he comes from, the Beshta Shon ain't just the richest man in the world, he owns the world, every building, every sorry stick, every square inch in the place."

Molly stared down at the polished wooden bar. "It must be grand to be that rich," she said, dreamily.

"Well, this little fellow is lonely.

He comes here once a year for a bit of a party."

"And you were supposed to keep him out of trouble? They assigned you, Onayly? What happened, did you lose him?"

The cop nodded his head miserably. "I just got to find him," he said.

"Well, you were headin' for Slowboat Sadie's when you left here last night. That's who he was askin' for. I don't know if you made it there or not. He was attractin' attention, throwin' money around like it was last week's newspaper. I hope nothin' happened to the gentleman."

"If he was robbed," said Onayly, scowling, "I'd just as well sign myself aboard a prison ship and be done with it. But I'll find him. Thank you for the drink and the information." He finished the beer and walked out of the Sazerac, turning up the street toward Slowboat Sadie's. When he stepped inside that venerable hostelry, the bartender raised an eyebrow.

"You had some skate on last night, Onayly," Dusty Jack greeted the cop.

"So I've been informed," said Onayly. "Please, if you're after helping out an old friend, let me wet my whistle on a tittle of beer. I'm looking for my little pal."

Dusty Jack filled a frosted glass with golden ale and set it in front of Onayly. "Your pal with all the money?" he asked.

"Yep." The cop swallowed half of

the beer in one great, thirsty gulp.

A tall blonde woman sitting at a table across the dimly lighted room said: "Well, say, I know where he is." This was Slowboat Sadie herself. She was the proprietor of the establishment and a friend to all her customers, most particularly the crewmen of the long-haul freighters, whence her euphonious soubriquet. Now, when Onayly turned to observe the speaker, Slowboat Sadie appeared the same as she always did. She was a striking woman, let no one remark otherwise, and she had a certain grace about her that was at least half natural, the remainder consisting of conscious effort aided by generous doses of juniper liquor, administered on the quarter hour. The blondness of her hair was only mildly encouraged by some commercial preparation, a gilding of a rare lily on this desolate asteroid. But let us not judge her vanity harshly: it betrays a refreshing modesty, a blindness to her own true charm. Yes, Slowboat Sadie was no longer so young as the girls who worked in her establishment; and, yes, perhaps it was only the dim light that flattered her so immoderately. But it was Slowboat Sadie whom the Beshta Shon came to visit, and would you be the one to tell such a man he had erred in his choice of sweethearts?

"Perhaps, Sadie," said Officer Onayly, in a casual manner, "you have had dealings with Cap'n Helfmuhn."

"Sure and he's an old bucket of mud."

"That is as may be. But the old bucket of mud will have my shield and my head unless I find the Beshta Shon and return him safely."

Slowboat Sadie exhaled a pale cloud of cigarette smoke and took counsel with herself for a little while. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "it's nothing to me, but I guess I'll tell you where he is."

The grateful cop raised a hand. "Let me finish my beer first." And he tilted the glass and drained it dry with another long, deep swallow. All the while he regarded Slowboat Sadie and wondered why the Beshta Shon, with all his money and power, had come to this seedy little dive, when he could have gone to any of the posh luxurious spots that Onayly imagined must exist for the wealthy.

"You're some chaperone, Onayly," said Dusty Jack. "If ever they send a copper after me, I hope they send you. I promise we wouldn't sober up until the angels come to get us."

"Aw, climb a rope, Jack," said Onayly, in a dangerous tone.

The eponymous owner of the house left her table and came to the bar. She seated herself on the stool beside the policeman. It seemed to Onayly that she had failed to bring some of her girlish comeliness with her from the shadows.

"The Beshta Shon is safe enough," she said. "He's sleeping it off in the alley behind the building."

The cop gazed at her in wonder. "Do you know who he is?" He's one of the greatest men in the—"

"I know better than you who he is," said Slowboat Sadie. She waved a hand in a bored way, dismissing Onayly.

The officer muttered a few words too low for the woman or her nosy tapster to hear. Onayly went out of the barroom through a door in the rear and found himself in a narrow alley that smelled of many awful things well past their prime. Rotten cabbage leaves, egg shells, and coffee grounds the cop saw at first glance, the effluvious sweepings and outscourings that made a simple pallet for the magnificent Beshta Shon.

"Sir," said the officer, "perhaps you should wake up now. Let me escort you back."

There was no response from the sleeping man, unless you are capable of reading meaning in the open-mouthed snores of the gloriously squiffed. Onayly had not this talent.

"Sir," he said, nervously, "we can't let anyone find you like this. Please, sir." And timorously he shook the grimy shoulder of the Beshta Shon.

The little potentate stirred in his sodden dreams. "Wha," he declared. He opened one eye; it was the color of brick dust.

"Would you like me to help you sit up, sir?" asked Onayly.

The Beshta Shon nodded his head and immediately regretted the motion.

"I was potted," he said, in a fury voice.

"Yes, sir. That's it, sit up. We must get you back before anyone sees you this way."

The Beshta Shon opened his other eye and squinted the first. He turned his head one way and another until he focused on the policeman.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Officer Onayly, sir. Don't you remember me? I was with you last night."

"Last night — I don't recall last night. What am I doing here?"

Onayly didn't have the answer to that. He decided to let the question slip away into the bright afternoon. "Let's try standing now, sir," he said. He helped the small man to his feet.

"I'm fine now, officer. I'm very grateful to you for looking out for me. Yes, I'd better be getting back. I need to take a bath and put on some clean clothes."

The great Beshta Shon, proprietor of a rich industrial world, possessor of a fortune beyond the limited imagination of a poor man like Officer Onayly, staggered just a bit as he tested his legs. In no more time than it takes a newborn wildebeest to learn the same trick, the Beshta Shon had once again mastered the art of walking. The cop gave him encouragement in a soft, friendly voice. Together they made their way down the odoriferous alley.

"I shall call a car, sir," said Onayly.

"Thank you, officer."

A few minutes later, in the car, the Beshta Shon began to feel as if he might recover, after all. He sat back in the seat and uttered a long, weary sigh.

"I must apologize if I caused you any concern, officer," he said.

"No, sir, not at all."

"I have been coming to Springfield for a long time, and I always visit Sadie," smiled the Beshta Shon. "I'm in love with her, you know."

A large, fat fish falling from the sky into Officer Onayly's lap would not have puzzled him more. "But, sir, Sadie is—"

The gentleman stopped him with a gesture. "You do not need to tell me what you think of her, officer. You see only her brassy appearance. I have learned to love the beauty and gentleness that dwell beneath. Tell me, officer, do you know what this means?" A golden chain hung around his neck; on it was fixed a small golden pendant with the numerals 154 inlaid in lapis. The cop's eyes opened wider.

"You are one of the Thousand, sir," said Onayly, awe-struck.

A daunting barrier rose between the two men that no amount of shared adventure could ever overcome. The Beshta Shon had paid three years of his life and a vast amount of money, and he had become immortal. The Thousand would live virtually forever, their bodies incorruptible, their minds inviolate. When Springfield itself was no more, when Onayly and all his progeny were forgotten, the Beshta Shon

and the others of the Thousand would still be alive.

"You hate me now, don't you?" asked the Beshta Shon.

"No, sir." But an uneasy feeling aggravated the officer's complacency. It was the envy of one who knows he will not also live forever.

"I know what you are thinking — I have heard it often enough since I acquired this number. I have searched endlessly for someone with whom to share the lonely centuries. Whenever I found a woman whom I admired and respected, I learned that it was only my fortune she loved. Disappointment piled upon disappointment. I felt doomed to an eternity of loneliness. Then I met Sadie. She seems to be a — what would you call her? A common wench? But she is so much more than that, officer. She is the only truly honest person I have ever known. She gives everyone just the measure of respect he deserves, no more and no less. She is far more than what she looks, my friend."

"Still, she doesn't care anything for you. Perhaps if you told her—"

"I will win her in my own way," smiled the Beshta Shon. "I believe that I have already almost succeeded."

"Very well," said Onayly, dubiously. "It isn't any business of mine to begin with."

The car came to a stop before a palatial marble edifice, surrounded by gardens and fountains. A uniformed attendant helped the Beshta Shon from the vehicle.

"I want to thank you again," said the little man.

"Please, sir," objected the cop, "it was all in the line of duty. It was my privilege."

"I will return next year. Perhaps you will accompany me on my little fling again." The very notion caused a shudder in Onayly's robust, able form. The Beshta Shon reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled bills. He chose one at random and dropped it through the window, into Onayly's lap.

"I can't accept—" protested the cop.

"Please," said the Beshta Shon. And then he turned with a bemused smile on his face and started up the long flight of marble stairs.

The officer looked at the wadded-up money. "If it's a five or a ten," he muttered, "I guess I may keep it. If it's a twenty, I will have to report it to Cap'n Helfmuhn. I'm sure he'll know a good use for it." The cop smoothed out the bill on his knee and stared at it: in the corner was the number 1000. Onayly whistled softly.

A few minutes later the driver let him out of the car at Slowboat Sadie's. Onayly felt he owed the gentleman something. Inside the barroom everything was the same: Dusty Jack was serving up beer, Sadie herself had retreated to the table in the dusky corner, the customers were bickering fiercely about nothing vital. The officer went straight to Sadie.

"I trust you found him well," said Slowboat Sadie.

"I did. He will be leaving Springfield soon."

"We will see him again next year." The woman covered a yawn with her long graceful fingers.

"Sadie," cried the cop, "how can you treat him this way? The man loves you, you know. He has true feelings. He isn't just another drunken lout for you to boot into the alley. And he has so much to offer you, if you would only listen."

Sadie smiled a sad smile. "Does he, indeed?" From within her shimmering blouse she pulled a golden chain. Inlaid upon the golden pendant was the figure 838.

"Great bloomin' ducks, Sadie!"

"This is what he gave me twenty years ago, Onayly. Now think on this. To live forever is fine for a man like him, who has wealth and power and an empire to manage. But what of me? Shall I spend forever in this horrible place? This life is all I know, and the only escape from it is death. Your little friend stole that escape from me."

The policeman shook his head mournfully. "If you learned to love him, you could share all that he has, as well. But you must hate him a great deal."

Onayly thought he saw a modest flush suffuse the cheeks of Slowboat Sadie — her face glowed the charming

color of the palest pink crepe myrtle blossoms.

"I do not hate him," she said, softly. "I love him very much."

"But then—"

Sadie laughed. "Because, you slow-witted excuse for a cop, he has been begging me to marry him for thirty years. And if I did marry him today, what would the two of us do for the rest of forever? There are enough days for all of that. Let him come back next year, and maybe I will be sweet to him. Or if not next year, the year after. Or the year after that. I love him too much to let it go stale so soon."

Onayly looked at the woman for a moment and realized that the Beshta Shon had been perfectly correct: Sadie *was* beautiful. The cop was surprised he had never noticed it before. He went out of her establishment and headed back to the station; Captain Helfmuhn would be greatly pleased at the turn of events. As he walked, Onayly thought over what he had discovered that day. A little scrap of old, old poetry kept passing through his mind. "Had we but world enough and time," he recited, "This coyness, lady, were no crime." He repeated the lines to himself and smiled. Then he laughed out loud. As he strolled along, the stalwart officer twirled his nightstick in the way that made him the envy of all the rookies, and he whistled away the last bit of hangover from the night before.

Letters

Have young people stopped reading SF?

I have just finished reading the results of the F & SF reader poll published in the June issue. Of particular interest to me was the significant drop in under-18 readers (and in under-30 readers) because it confirms an observation I've been making for the last few years at A Change of Hobbit. I regret to inform you that the Youth is not reading elsewhere ... unfortunately, they are not reading at all. When *A Change of Hobbit* first opened ten years ago, the clientele was 75% under-25, but that has shifted completely to less than 20% under-20. Most of the young readers who come in now are brought in by parents who are readers (usually of SF) and who encourage their reading habits. When children or younger readers come in on their own, they generally buy role-playing games or movie novelizations or just come in to get change for the video games next door. Every so often I get young people looking for a book to read for a required book report and they invariably ask for: a) a novelization of a movie they've already seen, b) Cliff or Monarch Notes on *The Martian Chronicles* or whatever else their teachers have assigned, or c) "what's the shortest book you've got?" Any attempt we make to convince them that they might really *enjoy* reading a book is met with a blank stare and/or complete disbelief.

I can't say blanketly that television is at fault, for I and my contemporaries were the first television generation and we read, but the generation to follow us does not. I can tell you that video

games, however, have had a very bad effect on budding reading habits — a phenomenon I have noticed strikingly the last year. We are now situated two blocks from Santa Monica High School. A year ago, we could always tell when school was out for the day, because at 3:15, we'd get a swarm of (15-30) students in the store. We could even clock lunch hour because of all the young customers with backpacks and notebooks. Not now. This year, they all go next door to play Pac-Man and Donkey-Kong. No one comes in here after school, unless they need change for the machines. These kids no longer have the time or the money to buy books and magazines. (There are exceptions, thank God, like the 14 year-old who reads Disch and Moorcock and Ellison, but they are few and far-between.)

This scares me as a bookseller, but even more, it scares me as a reader. If our children don't read SF, they're probably not reading anything. And if no one reads from the next generation, no one will write for them. We who read have an obligation, I think, to turn the Youth on to reading. It is a habit we must help them to cultivate or they will never acquire it. If each of us spent a little time choosing a book for a child we know (I recommend high adventure of one sort or another as being the most accessible to them) and doing our best to impart enough enthusiasm to get them to give it a try, we might be able to start a new fad: reading for pleasure.

—Sherry M. Gottlieb
Owner, *A Change of Hobbit*
Santa Monica, Calif.

We'd be interested in hearing other observations or comments on this seemingly ominous trend.

Darkroom duplication

In his review of the ABC-TV series *Darkroom*, Baird Searles correctly notes that one of the stories in the premiere episode ("Closed Circuit") was based on a short story by Carter Scholz, "a young writer already of some reputation in the field," then goes on to say, "What I found most interesting here was that the basic idea, computer duplication, is also the gimmick of (*Darkroom* host James) Coburn's latest movie, *Looker*. Duplication is indeed the key word."

This is neither criticism nor background information; it is speculation and insinuation. Mr. Searles seems to be coyly suggesting that either Scholz or *Darkroom* ripped off *Looker's* "gimmick" for "Closed Circuit"; as the one who adapted Carter's story for television, I'd like to take this opportunity to set Mr. Searles straight on a few basic facts.

Had Searles bothered to do even the most minimal amount of research before making such a charge (such as consulting William Contento's *Index to Science Fiction Anthologies and Collections*), he would have discovered that Scholz's story, "Closed Circuit," originally saw print in *Clarion SF*, published in 1977 — four years before *Looker* was released. (And, in fact, the story was written in 1973, though of course there was no way for Mr. Searles to know that.)

This might be hopelessly naive of me, but I've always assumed that critics and reviewers had a certain responsibility to support their opinions with facts, not errant speculation.

It is indeed a bizarre coincidence

that *Looker* and "Closed Circuit" share both the same central concept and the presence of James Coburn, but that is all it is: a bizarre coincidence. I suggested adapting Carter's story for *Darkroom* in early August of 1981, while Coburn was not even signed to do the series until sometime in October ... by which time "Closed Circuit" was long since shot and in the process of being edited. I and everybody else involved with *Darkroom* didn't find out about *Looker's* content until about a week before its release ... which was a month before *Darkroom's* premiere.

Again, there was no way for Mr. Searles to know the foregoing, but the facts surrounding the publication of the original story were easily available to him. I hope that in the future, when tempted to make a bitchy insinuation like this one, he will resist the temptation long enough to ascertain whether the insinuation has any merit. In the meantime, I do think Mr. Searles owes Scholz a bit of an apology.

—Alan Brennert
Marina Del Rey, CA.

Baird Searles replies:

I'm afraid the speculation and insinuation here is all in Brennert's mind. I found it worthy of note that two works linked in an oblique way (through Coburn) had a duplicate plot element. If I were implying anything, it was the unoriginality of TV or film, since I was aware of the publication date of Scholz's story without consulting my Contento; I will always trust the writer for originality above the media producers. I'm sorry that the phrasing lent itself to this kind of unpleasant interpretation; I don't think the talented Mr. Scholz needs an apology since nothing was intended against him. And I suggest Mr. Bren-

nert think twice about his own speculation and insinuations.

The singular "thee"

In reference to "Poems to Play in the Piccolo" by George C. Chesbro in your May issue: a good story on an important theme — but I wish authors who are unfamiliar with a subject would do a little research. I'm also a bit surprised that one of your staff didn't notice the flaw.

I refer to the use of "thee" in the story. While it is true that very few people, and most of them Quakers, use this pronoun today, it is nevertheless part of our language and a magazine of your general excellence should learn how it is used. So should Mr. Chesbro if he intends to use it again.

"Thee" is singular. It is not merely a substitution for "you" — in fact, it's the other way around; "you" got substituted for "thee" and carried its number with it as a plural pronoun. Therefore, in his story, Mr. Chesbro's Quaker character should have said "Thee is a dead fool", "Thee has freely chosen...", "But why was thee...", etc.

This kind of mistake is common, since "thee" and "Thy" are obsolete usage to most people. I normally encounter it in film or on TV. I didn't expect to find it in F&SF, though.

—David Tucker
Alexandria, Va.

More on thighs

I was vexed by Cynthia Skier's an-

noyance at the sight of "another semi-clad female" (letters, May 1982). The thunder thighs depicted by artist Michael Garland erotically express the seductive qualities of Sparthera, the character in "Talisman" about whom prurient designs abound.

How else could Mr. Garland express these sentiments — with a severely clad and leatherbound figure as suggested by Ms. Skier? He chose an artistic expression that clearly works in this context — thunder thighs. The arousal inherent in this expression is art in this context — not the sleazy vamp suggested by Ms. Skier.

What is the peculiar neurosis that possesses certain women when they see an artistic portrayal of a fine female body? This possession only seems to occur upon depiction of a female, and not a male or hippopotamus.

I see absolutely nothing wrong with fine art, which the November cover certainly is. I do see something distasteful when people like Cynthia Skier attempt to limit the scope and appreciation of artistic expression by blind labeling of certain categories of art. My feeling from reading her letter is that she objects to any depiction of a sexy female. This objection is fine, but please do not subject me to it! I like looking at artistic depiction of sexual objects, especially female. If Cynthia objects, let her look elsewhere.

—James P. Royce
Piedmont, CA

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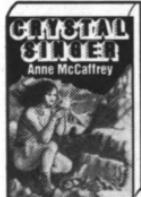
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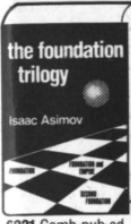
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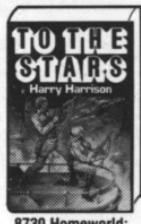
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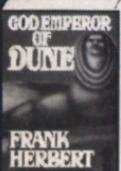
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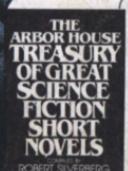
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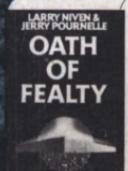
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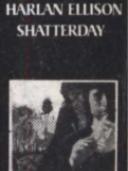
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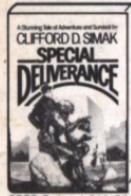
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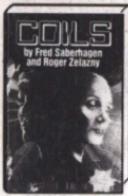
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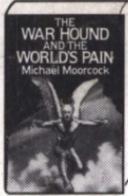
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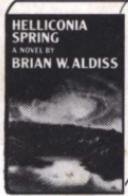
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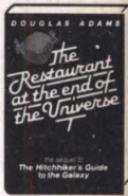
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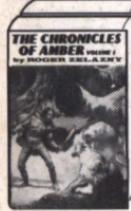
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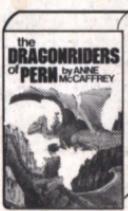
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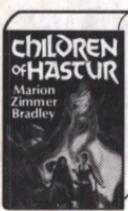
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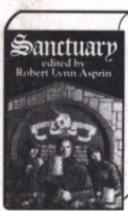
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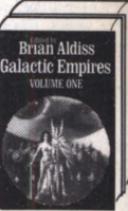
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